

Things That Happen after Beverly Leaves by [IfItHollers](#)

Series: [Things that Happen After \[2\]](#)

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Addiction, Blood, Canon-Typical Racism, Canon-Typical Violence, Disordered Eating, Eddie Kaspbrak Lives, Explicit Sexual Content, F/M, Flashbacks, Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault, Infidelity, Losers Club (IT) Friendship, Magic, Menstruation, Past Abuse, Past Child Abuse, Past Domestic Violence, Past Intimate Partner Violence, Past Rape/Non-con, Past Sexual Abuse, Post-IT Chapter Two (2019), Self-Esteem Issues, Smoking, Stanley Uris will have his say and that's that, Tom Rogan is his own warning, mix of book and film canon

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Kay McCall (IT), Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, Tom Rogan

Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, background Richie Tozier/Eddie Kaspbrak - Relationship, past Beverly Marsh/Bill Denbrough, past Beverly Marsh/Tom Rogan

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Summary:

Ben walked around with a yearbook page in his wallet for twenty-seven years, but Beverly had some other pressing engagements. Now, with the hardest thing in their lives accomplished, it's time to deal with everything else they had set aside. Featuring Beverly Marsh's divorce proceedings, Ben Hanscom turning around and staring himself in the face, the ethereal presence of Stanley Uris, and the power they left behind when they forgot themselves.

1. Out of the Water

Author's Note:

So as you'll be able to tell from the below content warnings, this work is gonna be more intense than its predecessor. I don't want to tag it for Rape/Non-con because nothing occurs onscreen and I don't want to give the wrong idea about what happens with Ben and Bev, but please note that I have chosen not to use Archive Warnings, and that because so much of Beverly's story relates to gendered violence, this is pretty heavy. Ben is also not doing as well as he'd like everyone to think, so if a heavy focus on food is going to be something bad for you, you may want to give this story a pass as well. Be safe reading, guys.

Content warnings for this chapter: Infidelity to an abusive spouse (Bev), mentions of racial profiling (Mike), mentions of suicide and suicidal implications, past infidelity (Bill) (they only kissed), smoking and craving cigarettes, domestic abuse and violence, intimate partner violence, Eddie's face wound, Richie killed Bowers, Ben's relationship with food is Not Great, memories of sexual harassment of a child (Bev), mention of the death penalty.

There's a kiss.

(This is not news to you, so we can move on.)

It's somehow the best kiss of Bev's life, despite the filthy quarry water (which Eddie is expounding upon above the surface) and the fact that her eyes are burning as she tries to see him through the opaque water, and both their lips are cold but Ben's mouth is burning hot behind them. (Where does Beverly's heart burn? There was a trail she thought she was chasing for a little while.)

She has dim memories of sunlight and the world spinning around her and green grass, and a kiss that felt like the end of the world. But her

eyes were closed and the sun was on her face and it was mostly about feeling free for the first time in a long time. Like when she showed Ben the postcard (how could she have showed Ben the postcard and not known?) and unfolded it from its quarters, she can break the memory open like a clamshell and find the shining thing inside.

They surface because they need to breathe. Out of the water, Bev feels sudden and powerful fear. The sunlight is white and cold, too.

You're a grown woman, Bevvie, you're a wife and you could have been a mother and you're a businesswoman and you're back in the same town you were a little girl in. Tom's out there and Lesley and Kay are out there and would any of them recognize you if they saw you now?

That's what this place does to Bev. She had forgotten the conviction with which she lived everything at thirteen. It occurs to her that she missed that, that it bubbled up out of her when she told Mike to "book me a room and say me a prayer" in her dark bedroom. That certainty.

Ben is certain. There's a lot of uncertainty still to come—Eddie's bleeding again and there's a body in the library and if Tom ever finds out where she went he will kill her, he won't give her the chance to walk away—but she has one certainty. She feels guilty about it for now, but she has no choice but to let herself cling to it.

Ben doesn't seem to mind.

She reaches out for his head with her hands and she can tell he knows what she's thinking, because he tilts his head back and gets a great gulp of air. Then she submerges him, dunking him under the water, and holding onto him as she follows him under.

They truck out of the water. Ben watches Bill consider the pros and cons of biking to the hospital with Eddie hanging onto his waist like when they were kids, but after a moment he sighs and loads Silver into the back of Mike's truck. Then he turns to look at them all.

Ben doesn't know what he's going to say, but Bev is holding his hand.

They're all soaked and tired; Mike looks grave; Richie is leaning on Eddie in a way that's meant to disguise how Eddie's starting to list to one side but only looks ridiculous.

They did it. At least, Ben thinks they did it. He tried to rinse his engineer boots in the quarry water, but between the green water and the slime he can't tell if they came clean or not. It feels like he ought to be wearing his bloodstains, like Bev. Instead he just feels faintly limned in gore.

"Eddie needs to go to the hospital," Bill says, and no one argues. Richie draws an arm tighter around him and Eddie gives a rueful grin, putting one hand up to his cheek. He ripped the gauze bandage off rather than hold water to the wound, but Ben didn't see what happened to it.

"I need to go to the police," Mike adds. He sounds tired. They all are, but the lines under Mike's eyes stand out in a way they didn't when he was alive, burning the tokens for the ritual. This is Mike when his hope has passed.

"You—" Richie says, and then falls silent.

"I need to go before someone comes looking for me," Mike says. "And they will. There's one black man in all of Derry, and I know what this town does to people."

"It doesn't," Bev says. Ben squeezes her hand and she looks at him. Her lips are tinted blue with her clear pale skin, and her makeup is all gone. Her eyelids look pronounced and dreamy. "At least, it shouldn't? Now that It's gone?"

Mike smiles a little, but his eyes don't change. "I don't know. I don't intend to give them a reason to finish me off."

"They won't," Richie says, his voice surprisingly fierce.

Richie scared the hell out of all of them when Bill came back half-dragging him. As soon as they got out of Neibolt Ben and Eddie were throwing him on his back on the street, ignoring the crumbling house behind them in favor of looking for a breath or for a pulse. But in the

water he was just same old Trashmouth Tozier, no brittleness about him.

The magic, Ben thinks. It was the magic, it rips through you.

And he thinks about the sides of the clubhouse wall filling in on him, and he shudders.

Mike's smile takes an ironic tinge. "I'm gonna need you if that's the case, Richie, but one way or another they're going to have questions."

"We need answers," Bill says. "Not just for Bowers. For Eddie's face. For what we're all doing here."

"A thirty-year reunion," Ben says quietly.

Beverly says, "Stanley."

The space between Eddie and Mike in their circle becomes pronounced.

Bill closes his eyes. "Mike," he says, "you called checking in on your old friend Stanley. Wanted to invite all of us up here to catch up on the good old days."

Richie gives a harsh laugh.

"You found out that he'd killed himself," Bill says. "We came here together to mourn and to honor his memory."

It sits wrong in Ben's gut, like trying to cram just anything into the space where Stanley should be standing upright, his guidebook in hand, his eyes rolling. The empty well a missing tooth leaves in a gumline. Asymmetry Ben can perceive but won't know for sure is there until he gets out his meter tape and measures. A little flaw that throws the rest of the design into relief. A hexagon when there should be a beautiful crowning point, a seven-pointed star.

"Yes," Ben says. "The dinner."

"The dinner," Mike repeats.

The waitress saw them. She'll be able to speak to their camaraderie, their drinking, the way Mike seemed to lose it at the end of the meal, the way Richie shouted in the doorway and the way they all split off.

A friend group torn apart.

"Where did we go?" Ben asks. "After Bowers attacked Mike and Richie put him down, where did we go for hours?"

Bill squares his jaw and squints into the sunlight. "Looking for me," he says. "He went after Eddie, he went after Mike, and you couldn't find me. You had to make sure I was alive. Don't repeat it like that, when you tell the police—it has to be in your own words, if they hear the same things they'll never believe this wasn't a conspiracy."

And it is, Ben realizes slowly. Not about Bowers, because that wasn't their fault. But it's a conspiracy to keep Derry quiet, to not discuss the house on Neibolt Street falling in, to not make anyone ask any questions about the blood all over Bev's blouse or the dirt ground into Ben's nail beds. Last time Bowers took the blame.

"And you had to bring me out of the quarry," Bill says. "And we're going straight to get help now. You don't know what I was doing there. You're scared, a little bit, after Stan. A little more after Bowers. But we needed to be together. That's what you tell them."

That you don't know what I was doing there, after Stan makes Ben nervous in the same unsettled way. Bill Denbrough doesn't look like a man about to kill himself, but Ben has no doubt that if the police ask him Bill will swear up and down and they'll believe him, and maybe Bill will cry and the tears will be real, after what they've seen, and everyone will understand.

"In our own words," Richie says. "I killed Bowers, you went swimming, and now we're going back up to take Eddie to get stitches and for me to confess to murder."

"That's not..." Mike says slowly.

"No, no, it's okay," Richie says, when Mike trails off. "*In our own words*, like that's ever been my problem."

Start talking, Stan said.

Mike's truck has two seats. Richie's car has four.

Richie gets his keys out of his pocket and looks them all over, then hands them to Ben.

"I want my security deposit back, Haystack," he says.

They're all filthy. Ben has alien egg slime on his boots.

"You want a lot of things, Trashmouth," he replies, but he takes the keys. Bev sits in the back with Eddie and pulls his head into her lap, and Bill rides shotgun, one arm braced on the passenger door and his head dropped low and at an angle. He looks like a man going to war.

It should be over. They deserve for it to be over. But it's not.

And Ben can handle that.

Bev wants a cigarette.

In an abstract way, Bev always wants a cigarette, but that particular ache in her mouth has become like the presence of an underwire bra on her skin over the years—she doesn't feel it if she doesn't think about it.

But as Eddie says to the woman at the check-in desk "And nobody call my wife" and gives Bev as his emergency contact, suddenly it's the only thing Bev can think about. She wants the weight and heat in her mouth, between her front teeth. She wants the smoke to curl on her tongue.

She sits in the waiting room with the rest of them and finds that she keeps raising her hand to her mouth, keeps absently fitting her thumbnail into a groove in one of her incisors, keeps fidgeting. Ben reaches over and she has a reflex of fear, but he just laces his fingers through hers and around her left hand. She lets her thumb rest on her lower lip and smiles at him, and Ben's face does that thing where his cheeks apple up.

But then they are confronted by the monotony of waiting for the ER to see Eddie. Even though he has a hole in his face. He keeps tilting his head back and staring at the ceiling as he fills out paperwork.

“Everything okay?” Bev asks, though she knows it is not.

“I can’t remember when I last had a tetanus shot,” Eddie mutters, dropping his head back down to stare at the clipboard. “It’s been over ten years, I’m pretty sure, but goddamn, I’m gonna have to get a tetanus shot, the fucker stabbed me in the face and I have to voluntarily submit to a tetanus shot, goddamnit.”

Suddenly all Bev can think of is the belt. He took the buckle off the belt—it was the belt he used just on her, not for holding up anything other than his fist over their marriage—he left it hanging in the closet, he kept it just for hitting her, the loop where the buckle should go kept only for his fist. If it were any ordinary belt he used to hit her she would have been able to jerk it out of his hand when she reached for it, and—

“Edward?” asks a nurse, and Eddie jumps up.

“God, I want a cigarette,” Bev breathes.

Ben squeezes her fingers. “I was going to go get something from the vending machine. I doubt they’ll have cigarettes, but do you want anything to eat?”

“Yes,” Bev says, shaking her head. “Yeah, anything.” She brushes her hair out of her face.

“Okay.” He gets up and goes back through the entry doors into the hallway. They swing as he goes.

Bev becomes very aware of Bill watching her from the opposite seats. She turns back around and awkwardly runs her hands up under her hair at the back of her head. She’s really tired. She’s been afraid before, and that’s worn her out, but this is different from getting up and putting on the dark glasses and going to work. This is still staying in the space, this is Tom never getting up or telling her to shut up or falling asleep himself and just lying in the bed listening to

her cry.

Tub of guts, she called him. *If you come near me again, I'll kill you. Do you understand that, you tub of guts? I'll kill you.*

"Bev?" Bill asks.

She startles and jerks her head up. "Yeah," she says.

"Are you doing okay?" Bill asks.

She gives him a thin smile. "Fine."

Bill leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees. "I'm sorry," he says.

She shakes her head. "It's not you."

"I know," Bill says. "But I st-st-st—" He closes his eyes and grits his teeth. "I have to say it. Because I am sorry. And I should n-n-n—" He opens his eyes again. "This isn't the best time, is it?"

"No," Bev says.

Bill nods slowly. "Okay."

A nurse comes through the double doors. "Ma'am?" she says.

Bev sits up. "Yes?"

Bill sits up as well. "Is he okay?"

"I'm sorry, I can't discuss the patient's medical condition without his permission," the nurse says. "But we have a few questions for his emergency contact, some things we need you to confirm while he's receiving treatment."

"Oh," Bev says. She's not sure what she's supposed to be able to answer that Eddie isn't able to answer himself. She gets up and glances at Bill, and then back through the doors Ben went through. Then she follows the nurse.

The nurse takes her back into a waiting room and says, "We just have

a couple of questions for you.”

Bev wishes she had a purse to fidget with. She sits down on the little chair.

The nurse sits at the tiny stool and turns around. “Ma’am, can I ask what happened?”

Bev blinks. “With Eddie? We were at the hotel. He was attacked by a man who came in through the bathroom window. I didn’t—didn’t see it, but he came out and he said—” She has to close her eyes, remembering how muted Eddie’s voice was, all his blood. “He said, ‘Bowers is in my room.’”

“Yes, ma’am, we’ve called the police to take the patient’s statement,” the nurse says. “I’m asking you, what happened?” And she gestures at Bev’s arms.

Bev looks down at her own wrists. “Oh,” she realizes.

The nurse listens.

“Oh,” Bev says, and then gets up. “I’m sorry, there’s been a misunderstanding. I’m—” She gesture with one of her bruised arms. “I’m not a patient here, and the situation is under control, and...” She reaches in the general direction of the door.

“It’s okay,” the nurse says. She raises her hands. “It’s okay. I just want you to know, if you need help. We’ll be here. And we’re willing to listen.”

“Thank you,” Bev says. “Thank you—I know what it looks like, but I’m fine. I’m—safe.” She hears herself and laughs. “I know what it sounds like, but I’m as safe as I’ve ever been.”

Ben takes too much time staring at the vending machine.

Veggie Straws, Cheetos, Doritos, chocolate bars, salted almonds, trail mix, gum. No cigarettes. Bottles of iced coffee, soda, Gatorade, name-brand water in the vending machine next to the one with the food.

God, all of their collective blood sugar must just be tanked. Ben opens up his wallet and sticks his card in the reader—they have vending machines that have card readers now, and he doesn't even care if it skims all his information at this point. He just taps the button and starts cranking out junk food. What can Eddie eat? He has a hole in his face. Salt is probably gonna hurt. Should Ben take the car and go get him some Ensure or something?

He just fills up his shirt with junk food and drags it back into the waiting room.

Bill is sitting there, looking lost. Bev's seat is empty.

Ben, still holding his shirt out like a goody bag, looks at the empty seats and raises his eyebrows.

“She went back to answer some questions,” Bill says.

Ben nods and then shakes his shirt out onto one of the tiny end tables. “Do you want—?”

“Oh my god, man, throw those M&Ms over here.”

Ben tosses him the M&Ms. Bill catches them in both hands.

Bev comes back out. She looks faintly unsettled and she’s walking quickly; one of her hands reaches across her body like she’s putting up a barrier.

Ben automatically sits up. “Everything okay?”

She sits down quickly. “Fine,” she says. “Just some questions, we got it straightened out. Did you—oh yes.” She reaches across him and picks up the baggie of Cheez-Its.

When Eddie comes out they are all stuffing their faces. He holds up both hands; he has a fresh gauze patch in place on his cheek. “Seriously, guys?”

Ben tosses him a water.

Eddie does much the same slap-catch that Bill did and then cracks the

cap off the water. “Okay, take me home, I need to sleep for a full day.”

“Home?” Ben asks.

Eddie shakes his head. “The Townhouse, just take me some place I can lay down.”

They go back to the Derry Townhouse. Like earlier when there was an actual stabbing on the premises, no one is there. Not even the police. Eddie has a real thousand-yard stare looking up the stairwell, and Ben chased after Bowers, saw him through the open window with the car idling.

If Ben had managed to catch Bowers, would Mike and Richie be with them right now? Would they all be together? Or would Bowers have gotten Ben like he was trying to get Mike, like he got Ben years and years ago, like Pennywise got him in the house on Neibolt?

“Why don’t we all stay in my room?” Bev asks on a yawn.

Shaken out of his reverie, Ben turns around and looks at her.

Her face is pale but not frightened—not any more than it’s been in the last several days, anyway. “Like we’re kids. Wait for Mike and Richie to come back, and if we wake up, we’ll know that this actually happened.”

She looks from Ben to Eddie to Bill, and Ben can imagine that—imagines waking up in his hotel room with his bed empty and his boots decaying in the corner and wondering if any of this was real or if it was a dream—a horrible dream with an end that—should have been more painful, he suspects. He’s still waiting for the other shoe to drop and to crush him like a bug.

And then he looks at Eddie and sees the dread on his face.

“Okay,” Eddie says. “But if I wake up and see someone standing in the bathroom with the lights out, I’m probably gonna stab first and ask questions later.”

Ben, considering that, tilts his head from side to side. Bill reaches out

and claps him on the shoulder. “Expect nothing less.”

“As long as we’re quiet, I doubt there will be a problem with that. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m asleep on my feet.” Ben looks around toward the desk. There are several empty hooks on the board behind it, but they’ve bought out the entire place. “Does anyone actually work here?”

“Apparently not,” Bill says. “I dragged Richie I don’t know how far through a sewer today, so I can’t drag my mattress around.”

“Yeah, that’d be stupid,” Ben says.

“Says the only guy who could probably do it,” Eddie mutters.

But they need sheets and blankets and pillows. Bill and Eddie split off, returning to the scene of the crime. Ben drops a kiss on Beverly’s cheekbone before he can talk himself out of it, then says, “I’ll be back” and sprints up the stairs to his room. He kicks off his boots and drags all the bedding off the bed.

Upstairs, he can hear Eddie and Bill bickering. It’s muted, compared to Eddie’s usual histrionic levels. That could be because he’s tired or it could be because he’s talking to Bill, and it’s hard to argue with Bill.

Ben comes back downstairs in his bare feet. He knocks on Beverly’s door.

“Come in,” she says.

The door is slightly ajar, just enough that the lock doesn’t engage. When Ben opens it, she’s still watching the doorway warily, her hands resting on the edge of the bed and her expression dark and serious. Like until she saw him, she wasn’t sure what was going to come through it. She softens once she spots him.

“Sorry,” she says.

Ben shakes his head. “No, it’s fine, I get it.”

“No, I’m—” She brushes her hair out of her face again and he sees a

flash of those brown bruises go by. They ought to burn him up—if he were younger, they would have burned him up. But there's nothing he can do about them right now, except watch her. She shakes her head and doesn't look him in the eye. “I don't know if you wanted—but I feel like we need to all be together. As soon as Mike and Richie get back, we need to all be together.”

It takes Ben a moment to work out that she's apologizing for inviting the rest of the Club into her space. As if Ben would think that's anything less than an excellent idea, as if Ben has any claim over this room beyond what she allows him.

“I feel it too,” he says.

She looks up at him. Her eyes catch the light from the window.

It's the truth, so he goes on. “We need to stay together if we can,” he says. “There'll be time for—anything you want. In the whole world, whatever you want. If you want to have a high school sleepover with the rest of our middle school friends, count me in.”

Her lips pout a little when she smiles, like she's trying to suppress it. “What does ‘whatever I want’ look like?”

“You tell me,” Ben says.

He can hear Eddie and Bill dragging fabric in the hallway; in the next moment Eddie appears in the doorway.

“Um. Are we interrupting anything?” he asks.

Bev shakes her head. Ben turns around and sinks his bare toes into the carpet, steadyng himself.

“So I was just talking to Bill,” Eddie says, “and I got stabbed today, and I think I should get first refusal for the bed. Bev, can I please share with you? I'll be—” He holds up his hands to indicate *a perfect gentleman*.

Ben smiles a little to himself, looking down.

Bev glances over her shoulder at him and he just shrugs, grinning like

a kid. He'd go wherever she told him to, but he wasn't looking forward to the experience of climbing in bed with her in front of Bill. Or maybe he was, and that's such a vile impulse it's better that he not be allowed to. He'd rather wake up on the floor next to Beverly's bed than alone in his hotel room upstairs.

"Of course you can," she says to Eddie.

Eddie then seems to realize he's still fully dressed and his clothes are filthy and bloodstained. He apologizes. Ben turns his back to them and begins taking off his jeans, at which point Eddie's apologies abruptly cut off and Ben hears him climb into bed.

"Do you want the duvet? I don't trust hotel duvets, I just need some of the sheets," he says quickly. "I'm sorry to be so—uh, presumptuous, but they gave me a painkiller at the hospital and I think it's really better that I'm lying down right now. I'm—sorry, Bev."

"Eddie," she says. Ben turns back around to find that they're hugging. "It's okay. I'm so glad you're okay. When you threw—I was so scared, Eddie, I thought I'd gotten you killed, but you were so brave."

Eddie is blushing. "I—well. You. You gave me the, uh. Hello, Ben."

Ben walks over to the window, checks the lock, and begins lowering the blinds. Then he goes into the bathroom and checks the lock there, too. He can't imagine Eddie Kaspbrak forgetting to lock a window. He doesn't know how Bowers got in, but he can't believe that Eddie of all people would have forgotten something like that.

When he comes back out, Bev and Eddie are in the bed together, and Bill is setting up a pallet on the left side nearer the door. He makes eye contact with Ben and then holds up a pillow. Ben extends his hands, and Bill lobs it at him much like the M&Ms from earlier. He kneels and tugs the duvet into a makeshift pallet as well, putting the pillow on the floor in front of the nightstand.

Bev rolls over to look at him. He has to glance up to see her eyes on him. "Are you sure this is okay?" she murmurs.

There was a time when Ben felt certain that Beverly Marsh would always be taller than him.

“Give me two minutes and I’ll be out, blanket or no blanket,” he says.

“Definitely blanket,” Eddie says, appearing on Bev’s other side to shove a duvet at him.

When Ben lies down, Bev drops her arm down over the side of the bed. She can’t reach all the way, but Ben reaches back out to her, and with surprising strength she grabs his forearm. Her eyes tighten slightly at the corners—something close to a smile.

“Good night,” she says, though the early daylight is creeping in.

“Good night,” he murmurs back.

Richie wakes everyone up by announcing, “Oh, it’s not a threesome!”

Eddie’s a good bedmate. In his sleep he lies close, but he keeps his hands to himself, no awkward elbows or knees anywhere, no shoulders jabbing her in the breast. He doesn’t take up the entire mattress and he puts off heat like it’s his job.

So of course Richie flings himself between them. Bev feels the mattress bounce and rolls away to avoid banging heads with Eddie, and Richie scrunches right up into that space like it’s where he belongs. Bev comes nearly eye to eye with Ben, who’s sitting up with his hair wild. He raises his eyebrow at her. *This okay?*

If I said no, I could sleep on the floor with Ben, she thinks.

But it’s okay with Richie. They pretended to kiss at the Jade of the Orient and he laughed as hard as anyone when she dropped a shrimp into his mouth. The only thing she has to worry about is whether he’s as warm as Eddie, and he has the advantage of being almost a foot taller than her, so he has the mass going for him.

“Where’s the duvet?” Richie asks.

"Have it," Ben says aloud. His voice is thick and heavy with sleep and —Bev realizes as it shakes her down to her bones—very sexy. "Everything okay?"

"Posted bail. Mike and I are both forbidden from leaving the state of Maine for investigation into second-degree murder!"

An electric alertness tries to take root in Bev's brain, but it slides away under the fog of interrupted sleep. She didn't think they'd have to post bail, not when they volunteered themselves so readily. It doesn't seem right that these things keep happening around them. They need space, they need time, they need to sleep.

Richie seems to disagree, from how he's needling Eddie. "You too, Spaghetti. Cops are gonna want to talk to you next."

"I said shut up," Eddie mumbles.

It's half sleepy lack of inhibition, half the bizarre thought that she'll be able to shield them both with her body that makes Bev roll over and wrap an arm around Richie. She feels him stiffen in surprise but before she can remember to be embarrassed about it he's relaxing and putting his head down between the two pillows.

"There we go. Haystack, you want to get in on this? Are you and your muscles cold down there?"

Bev smothers her smile into Richie's back, somewhere below his shoulders. If anyone could see her now, in bed with two men and inviting a third in...

They wouldn't be able to do anything, she thinks as Bill and Mike settle in front of the door like guards. When we're all together, nobody can touch us.

Well. Not all together.

Richie seems dead set on trying to fit four people onto the queen-sized bed. "You sure, Haystack? Going once, going—"

Bev reaches up, feeling for Richie's face, and finds his glasses. She lowers her hand a bit and covers his mouth. "Shhh. Beep beep."

"I'm all right," Ben says, that patient smile still in his voice. It means a lot to Bev that he's not jealous, that he's not questioning her choices, that he *understands*. Even about Bill—Ben understands. Part of her hopes that he feels the same way, that if he were in her place curled up behind Eddie and Richie it would be just the same for him, that he could close his eyes and get some rest.

Her body feels heavy and slow. She pulls her hand down from Richie's mouth and grabs on to the back of his shirt. "You better warm me up, Tozier, Eddie's a champion space heater."

Voice already going slow with sleep, Richie says, "Oh, I'd warm you up, but I don't know if Haystack'd care for that."

Bev laughs once into his back and thinks, *Please don't let me dream. Please don't let me see any of them—let me just rest, let me not see It, or Stan, or Tom. We just need quiet. We just need time and space and rest, and then the rest of the world can happen, but not now. Now it has to be just us.*

Ben researches lawyers.

He brought his laptop; he never goes anywhere without his laptop these days, because people always need to talk to him about something, but he doesn't get any Skype calls. Instead he's free to look up criminal defense lawyers in this area of Maine. Richie hasn't said anything to him about it, and if Richie tells him he's got it covered Ben will back off, but he has to do something.

And Richie doesn't look like he's got it covered. When Bill and Eddie got up and went downstairs to call their wives, he sat up and stared after them, and then he looked around with a blankly lost expression on his face.

"You okay there, Richie?" Ben asked, because Mike was sleeping.

Richie's expression sharpened into focus and he said, "Bed's too big now, Haystack. Get up here, make a Bev sandwich."

Bev laughed.

“You can’t invite someone else into bed without permission,” Ben pointed out.

Richie leaned all the way over Bev. “Excuse me, Ms. Marsh. Could Haystack pretty please come join the cuddle puddle? Look at that.”

“What am I?” Mike demanded from the floor.

“Look, let me have ‘tallest guy in the bed,’” Richie says. “Just let me have that.”

Ben looks at him, incredulous. “We’re the same height.”

“What part of *just let me have that* do you not get?”

Bev let her head loll on the pillow. “Come on up, Ben.” She rolled over and kind of shoved Richie over to the left side of the bed, making room for him on the right.

It was nice to get a big hit of mattress for the first time in over twenty-four hours. Ben lay carefully to give Bev enough space, but Richie immediately squished her between them, draping his arm all the way over her and onto Ben.

“There we go,” he said. “If that proves insufficient we’ll get Mike up here.”

“For what?” Mike demanded.

“Tenderly cradling—I don’t know, man! You cannot tell me you don’t know how to show a girl a good time.”

“Beep beep, Richie,” Bev said, slightly muffled. “Back to sleep.”

“As Her Majesty commands.” He lowered his head and vanished behind Bev’s hair.

Ben drew his head back a little, trying to give her space and look down into her face.

She blinked at him slowly, all copper eyelashes and sleep haze. She smiled a little bit and then knotted her hand in his filthy shirt.

And if she was going to hold him there, Ben was of course going to stay as long as she wanted.

It's not, he reflects as he scrolls through yet another *Compare Top Criminal Attorneys* list, that he expects anything from her at this point. Emotions were very high in Its lair. He meant to save her life—that was enough and it will always be enough. If the kiss was relief, or *thank god we're alive*, or even *you look nice soaking wet*, that's fine. He meant what he said and he told her the truth, and that's all that he can do. For several shining golden moments, that was enough.

He finds an old listing for a criminal defense attorney who took murder cases, but it's a couple years out of date. He follows the guy's listing—he grew up in Castle Rock nearby, just outside of Shawshank, but now he's in Florida defending death row inmates. His success rate is predictable for what you'd expect defending death row inmates to be, especially down south, but he has glowing reviews from his clients' families.

He makes a note of Henry Deaver and then decides to turn to more practical concerns.

"We need new cell phones," he pitches to them in the bar. "And to go grocery shopping. Eddie, are you starving?"

Eddie is on painkillers and still drinking heavily, which worries Ben a little bit. "I should probably eat something," he concedes after a moment, staring at his glass.

"What can you eat that won't hurt your cheek?" Bev asks.

"They put this bandage on the inside—it's like a putty but it's hardened, and it's really weird because it feels like there's something in my mouth all the time," Eddie says, which is not really an answer but it's weirdly reassuring.

She does the fidget she's been doing a lot for the last twenty-four hours, lifting her hand to her mouth and resting two fingers on her lips. After her *God I need a cigarette* in the hospital she hasn't said anything more about it, but she is chewing down her nails to the quick. Ben offered her the sesame seeds from the vending machine

and she ate them, but clearly it didn't do anything about the nicotine craving.

"So soft food?" Ben asks.

"Baby food?" Richie suggests.

"Beep beep," Mike says without looking up.

Mike's home is a crime scene. He is dealing with this surprisingly well, but when Ben made eye contact with Bill over Mike's head, Bill widened his eyes and shook his head slowly. So Mike is not all right either.

"Is your phone okay, Mike?" Ben asks.

Mike takes out his phone, which is in one of the indestructible black waterproof cases Ben had when he was going to construction sites every day. Now he wishes he'd brought it.

"Let's make a list," Ben says. "I'll go into Bangor and pick some things up."

The list includes yogurt, soup ("How are you going to make soup in a hotel room?" Richie demanded. "Do you think anyone's actually going to stop us from using the kitchen?" Ben returned. "Do you seriously think there's a kitchen in this dump?" Richie replied), Ensure, and pudding for Eddie, prepaid phones for everyone except Mike (responsible) and Eddie (coming with Ben to Bangor), paper and writing utensils for Bill ("I'm going a little crazy here," he confessed), and a new e-reader charger for Mike (the device happened to be in his car at the time, which is the only reason it isn't currently cordoned off with the rest of his personal belongings). Mike needs clothes, but he says he'll buy them himself.

"Oh, that's good," Bev says. "I was going to walk to the drugstore in town and pick some things up, but I need some new clothes too, I don't know what I was thinking when I was packing. I can meet you at Freese's."

Ben raises his eyebrows, but if she doesn't want him to pick up personal items for her, he's not going to press her.

“You need anything, Ben?” Bill asks.

Ben shakes his head and finishes messaging his list to himself. When he gets his new phone, he’ll be able to see it, and then he can take Eddie grocery shopping.

“I’m fine,” he says.

Beverly is out of birth control pills.

She can’t remember how many she had when she left the house—she always kept them in her toiletry bag so they were out of Tom’s way, and he never asked her any questions about what was in there, and it was the first thing she threw into her suitcase when Mike called. She made it out with everything she hadn’t thrown at him from the vanity, which means she needs to buy new hand cream and moisturizer and makeup and the like, but most pressingly is that she’s going to get her period soon.

Walking into Keene’s Drugstore and heading over to the feminine hygiene products aisle makes her feel just like a thirteen-year-old girl again. She blushed when she had to ask her dad for the money, and told him it was for *lady’s things*, and he curled his lip and gave her a whole ten dollars. She’d been saving her quarters and going to the girls’ room at school, but now that school was out for the summer she had to manage it on her own. She remembered walking into the aisle and hearing someone *whistle* at her from behind one of the displays, but she’d been too scared to turn around and see who.

There’s no question of whether she can handle her period again—only that it is coming, regular as clockwork as it has been since she started taking the pill in college. Now that she’s on the placebos—the sugar pills meant only to keep the dates, so that you bled and knew you were safe, that they had done their job—she expects it to happen any day now.

Part of her is actually surprised Pennywise didn’t bring it on early. It liked tormenting her with the blood enough.

It turned out to be She after all, in the end.

Bev really wants a cigarette.

She picks up a pack of pads and a box of tampons and takes them to the counter. A girl with blond hair and a bored expression rings her up, and then puts her purchases in an opaque white bag. Bev pays with the last of the cash out of her wallet and then turns toward the door.

In the light, she can almost see them. Eddie and Stanley, hands stacked with white antiseptic stuff. *There's a kid outside*, Eddie had rattled off, so fast Bev had to look to Stan for a translation, *looks like someone killed him*. And Bev had done what she could, had facilitated juvenile delinquency. She didn't know who whistled at her in the drugstore but she knew that she could make it happen again if she so chose, and she went up to Mr. Keene and prattled about Superman and made Greta Bowie sulk and glower.

Superman was bleeding outside with his back up against the wall. And Ben had never looked at her like that—had never looked at her without a blush on his face, in fact, until they met up at the Jade of the Orient.

She takes her bag and meets Mike in Freese's.

He's laying out shirts and only glances at her bag. "Got what you needed?" he asks.

Bev nods.

He holds up the sleeve of one plaid shirt to his cheek. "You're the fashion designer, how's this color on me?"

Bev smiles. "It makes you look like Bill," she replies.

Mike lowers the sleeve and smiles down at the cuff. Then he turns to her and says, "You're right. He always went around in those..." He shakes his head. "If I get it, do you think he'll notice if I dress just like him?"

"Knowing Bill?" Bev asks. "No."

Mike checks the tag on the shirt, whistles, and puts it back. “Damn, I thought these people made their own clothes.”

“We should get matching *Freese’s* t-shirts,” Bev says.

Mike’s eyes go glassy with memory. “And dress like...” His eyes focus.

“Richie,” they say at the same time, and then break into giggles.

Bev isn’t laughing when she tries to pay for the new blouse and a pair of jeans. The clerk tries her debit once, then twice, and then a third time. Then he says apologetically, “I’m sorry, ma’am. Is there another card we can try?”

Her throat closing, Bev hands over her credit card, the one from the bank. *Please let it be the reader*, she thinks, but she knows it’s not. The clerk looks even more uncomfortable when he hands this one back.

“Try this one,” Bev says, and holds out her red Macy’s card. This one’s in her name only, and Tom has no access to it.

This time the purchase goes through.

Mike says nothing as he lays down a series of identical black and navy shirts. “I’m going to have to appear in court,” he says. “Gonna need you then, Bev.”

“I promise I won’t let you go in looking anything but your best,” Bev says.

Mike shakes his head. “Nah, I mean Richie. You seen the man? Jury’s gonna take one look at him and condemn us both to the chair.”

They haven’t used the chair at Shawshank in decades, but Bev and Mike both laugh. It’s not funny.

They go back to the Townhouse. Ben and Eddie are still out, and Richie and Bill are sitting in the bar, talking in hushed tones. As soon as they walk in, Richie’s voice loudens as if for their benefit and says, “I don’t know, man, I’d see a doctor about it, I mean, I’ve never seen a fungus move like that before. You should probably ask Eddie.”

Bill grabs Richie by the forehead and shoves him back. “You guys all right?” he asks.

Bev nods. “I’m just going to go put my stuff away.”

“Hey, Denbrough, you had that shirt since you were thirteen, man?” Mike asks.

Bill looks down at his green plaid flannel shirt and frowns, as if actually trying to remember. “No?” he says, but he doesn’t sound certain.

Bev goes up, unfolds the lid of her suitcase, and sets the Keene’s bag down in it. She throws the lid back into place over it, and then sits on the end of the bed with her head in her hands for a little bit.

It was much easier to be triumphant when she felt less alone. She knows she ought to go back downstairs, but Mike saw her frantically trying cards, and she doesn’t know what he must think, or what Richie and Bill were talking about with such seriousness.

She lifts her head and for one heart-stopping moment she sees a man there, reflected in the mirror. Not Tom—too slender to be Tom, and too clean-shaven to be Ben.

Stan stands there, his curls slanting over his forehead, one hand slightly outstretched to her. He’s not the child she remembered in the drugstore, but the man she dreamed about—the man she saw with his hand reaching out like that over the edge of the tub, bleeding, there was *blood*.

Bev whips around, expecting some trick of It, but of course there’s no one there. And when she turns back around to look in the mirror again, like that trick It pulled in the mirror in Neibolt, he’s not there.

“Stanley?” she whispers.

But she’s alone.

When Ben comes upstairs, she’s going through her wallet, viciously tossing each of her bank cards into her suitcase. He pauses in the doorway as though hesitant about his reception.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

She considers telling him the truth—saying *Tom cut off my bank cards*. Which is good, actually, because if he hadn’t, she bets he would be able to find her. Is he trying to punish her, or to drive her back?

He meant to kill her, in their bedroom. If he sees her again, he’ll kill her now. And Bev just fought a monster the likes of which no one would understand. On one hand, what’s her husband compared to that? And on the other, she needs time.

“Give me time,” she tells Ben calmly.

He holds up a prepaid cell phone in one hand. It’s small and black and nondescript, and it’s a flip phone. She hasn’t seen one in years. “For you,” he says. “Programmed with all of our numbers. Richie’s started a groupchat, but I muted him until you’re ready to deal with that.”

Bev reaches back to him and holds out her hand, making him come forward and give it to her. He does. He’s wearing cowboy boots today, instead of the engineer boots he wore into the lair, and that combined with the slight duck of his head and the chambray shirt makes him look like the living embodiment of *aw shucks*.

“You going full Wild West, New Kid?” she asks him.

Ben smiles a little bashfully. “I’m out in Nebraska, officially. I see a lot of it.”

“Nebraska,” she repeats. That’s not so far from Chicago, but it’s nowhere Tom would think to look for her. Nebraska held no meaning for her before she reunited with Ben Hanscom.

“One more thing,” he says, and he takes his other hand out from behind his back. He lays the packet of cigarettes down on the bed next to her leg.

Bev stares at the Marlboros—they’re even the brand she used to smoke, once she had enough money to care about things—and then looks up from the glossy packaging into his face. There’s a clamp in her stomach born of habit that says *this is a trap*, but Ben’s face is

guileless as ever.

“Really?” she asks.

Ben shrugs. “I mean, if you quit and I’m just tormenting you with them, I’ll get rid of them for you. But if you want one, you should have them.”

She reaches out and touches the plastic wrapping, and then she fits the rectangle into her palm.

“I left my lighter at home,” she says.

“Do you want to borrow mine?”

Bev makes a mock-scandalized face. “Benjamin Hanscom, have you taken up smoking?”

Ben leans to the side and reaches into his pocket. “I’m gonna say something and it’s gonna sound really weird, but sometimes I need to melt stuff.”

That does sound really weird. It makes her laugh. “In a pyromaniac kind of way?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “No, for work. I had this thing with a piece of paracord, once, and that’s the stuff with the plastic fibers, so when you want to tie it together or secure it, you’re supposed to melt it. Anyway, I didn’t have a lighter on hand and the whole thing fell apart. This one was my mom’s, I started carrying it around after she passed.”

The lighter he hands her is sleek and gold-plated, with *A.H.* engraved on the bottom.

“Are you sure?” she asks him.

“Of course I’m sure,” he replies.

Tom said *It tastes like I’m inhaling someone else’s snot.*

“Will it bother you, kissing a smoker?” she asks.

Ben's smile widens, his cheeks appleing up like when he was a kid again. "Not at all."

At some point Bev's going to take off her blouse in front of him, and who knows what he'll think of her then. For now, she just sets both lighter and cigarettes down between her thighs, and leans forward to kiss him. Not long enough to get carried away, just enough to confirm that it's just as good outside of the quarry.

It's not, obviously. It's better.

He doesn't even seem to mind when she breaks it off to go smoke. When they come down the stairs together Richie yells "*Whoo!*" and everyone hushes him despite the fact that no one works in this hotel. Bev goes out onto the porch and cups her hand around the delicate little flame that spikes out of the lighter.

She smokes three before she can make herself go back inside.

2. Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben sets a perimeter. Bev is good in a pinch.

Notes for the Chapter:

I didn't think I was going to get this up today, my fiance and I were binging the last half of Season 1 of Barry and he kept smirking at me.

Content warnings: mention of child death, menstruation, smoking, discussion of violent suicide and suicidal thoughts, brief mention of overdose, discussion of and allusions to domestic violence and domestic abuse, mention of child abuse, mention of canonical violence.

If you came here from Chapter 1 of *Eddie Lives*, please don't pick too hard at the inconsistencies! It's a lot harder to get all seven Losers lined up in one room than I remembered, and I'm going to have to go back and edit the first one anyway!

Ben hates the Derry Townhouse.

It's not the Townhouse itself that's the problem; he's no doubt projecting onto the building all the upset he feels, but he still wakes the moment the crime scene investigators step through the front doors. For a moment he thinks it's just the disorientation of the hotel room swimming around him, but he can hear Mike breathing. He can see straight under the bed to where Mike is curled in the sleeping bag Ben brought back from Bangor, and then he hears Bill sit up.

Ben gets up too. They don't talk about it; they just put on their clothes in the minimal light creeping in from around the blinds and go upstairs.

In the meantime the crime scene investigators have realized there's

fucking nobody at the desk offering service and gone straight up to Eddie's old room. As Ben and Bill climb the stairs they can hear a man barking, "Well where the fuck are the sheets?"

Eddie is not stupid and he dragged his luggage set down to Bev's room after he gave his statement. He goes through the rigamarole of opening them up and then zipping them closed every day; he shuts himself in the bathroom for his five-minute shower in the mornings and Ben gives himself reason to sit at the desk and have a conversation with Richie or Mike or his assistant on the phone, or to put on Spotify and sing along, so that at least Eddie knows he's not alone. Ben doesn't know whether this is actually something Eddie needs or whether he just needs to hear if Eddie screams again, needs to be able to intervene beforehand, but Eddie hasn't complained about it once.

Ben turns his head to make eye contact with Bill, whose expression has hardened and turned determined. Bill shakes his head. They're not giving up the sheets. Not that that was in question, but Ben feels a little comforted that Bill has confirmed it.

A police officer sees them coming and demands, "Finally—do you two work here?"

Ben raises his eyebrows and looks down at his chambray shirt. He's never worked in a hotel, but he imagines they'd have something to say about his attire.

"No," Bill says. "We're guests."

"Well, do you know how to get ahold of the management?" he asks.

"No," Bill says. Ben shakes his head.

The officer's nametag says *Gardener*. "Right," he says. "Well, you can clear off. This is a crime scene."

"We know," Bill says.

"I'm a witness," Ben replies. He points back at the spot along the hallway where Eddie's blood stains the carpet. "That's where the victim came out to receive medical attention."

The officer's eyebrows shoot up. "Give me one second," he says, and goes back into the room.

Officer Gardener comes back out with instructions for them to wait for the detective in charge of the case.

"How long will that take?" Bill asks.

Gardener glowers at him. "As long as it takes."

Bill pointedly lowers his gaze to Gardener's nametag. "Gardener," he says aloud.

Officer Gardener snorts. "Yeah, you got my name," like he's gearing up to ask what Bill thinks he's gonna do with it.

Bill raises his hand and taps a fingertip on his nose. "You wouldn't happen to be one of Dave Gardener's boys, would you?"

Gardener's expression changes. When he speaks again his voice is less condescending, less irritated. "Do I know you?"

"William Denbrough," Bill says calmly. Ben catches the slight flare of Gardener's eyelids as he recognizes the name. "Your father found my brother's body, back in 1988. I was... twelve, then, but if I remember right you were one of four."

Gardener's face has gone carefully blank. "Harold Gardener," he says. "I was five when that happened."

"Georgie was six," Bill says. His gaze flicks from the nametag to the badge on Gardener's uniform. "And now you're in law enforcement." His tone is perfectly calm and cool.

Gardener's hand creeps up and touches his own badge. "Yes, sir," he says.

Ben feels a little pulse of pride in Bill. It's something territorial, something he wouldn't have guessed he felt about this tiny useless hotel, but in the space of thirty seconds Bill has claimed the whole building.

Bill's tone is perfectly calm and cool. "Good for you," he says, and Ben would even believe he means it. Slowly Bill turns to Ben. "Ben, can I get you a coffee while you wait?"

"That'd be great," Ben says.

So he's drinking his coffee when Detective Conley comes in with her partner. Gardener has made two minor attempts at small talk, asking once about Bill's books ("How do you feel about the ending?" Ben asks. Conley shrugs. "It was all right") and once about what the premier horror writer in the world is doing in Derry ("Reunion," Ben replies.)

"Gardener," Conley says. "Who's this?"

"Witness," Gardener replies.

Ben lowers his coffee and switches it to his left hand so he can shake the detective's. "Benjamin Hanscom, ma'am. I've already given my police statement at the hospital."

"Yes," Conley says slowly. "I remember. Your... *friend* was stabbed, was he?"

Ben accepts the emphasis on *friend* with only a slow blink, daring her to make her point. "Yes, he was stabbed in the face by an escaped mental patient. It was a massive shock, of course. Derry is such a friendly town."

Conley doesn't smile. She makes Ben walk her through coming up the stairs, finding Eddie in the hallway. Ben takes her back to the blood, explains how Beverly hung on to him, explains how he whispered that Bowers was in his room, explains how he got up and went to check for himself.

"And what did you think you were going to do?" Conley demands. "Why didn't you call the police?"

Ben channels a little bit of that hermit architect chill his reputation has given him. He shrugs. "I knew he was dangerous. Wanted to get eyes on him."

“How did you know he was dangerous?”

“Aside from the fact that he stabbed my friend in the face?” Ben says without a trace of pointed emphasis on *friend*. He straightens and picks up the hem of his shirt, rucking it up over his abdomen so she can see the *H* carved into his stomach, the way the lines are broken and split since he lost the weight. “Because he did this to me thirty years ago.”

Conley stares.

Having made his point, Ben lowers his shirt and sips from his coffee. “Do you have any other questions for me, ma’am?”

“Where’s the other witness?” she asks. “Ms... Rogan, was it?”

Ben takes another sip from his coffee and makes her wait for his response. “I’m not sure,” he says. “Either way, it’s early. I’d say you’d have better luck calling her.” The number that Bev gave at the hospital goes to her ruined cell phone, not the prepaid Ben bought.

The police cordon off Eddie’s room with yellow tape and a guard is set in front of it. When Ben goes back downstairs, Bill is waiting in the bar.

“That strong enough for you there?” he asks of the coffee.

Ben glances down at the cheap diner paper cup. Then he pries the lid off. “Make it Irish,” he says.

“Yes, sir,” Bill says.

Bev wakes up bleeding.

She knew this was coming; she put a light pad in her underwear when she was dressing for bed, since she hadn’t started by then and didn’t want to be caught unawares. But this is bad, she can tell as soon as she wakes up. This is the kind of “race to the bathroom” wakeup call she hasn’t had since she was a teenager.

And she's in a room with—three men? She looks around for Ben and Bill, carefully sitting up so she doesn't move her lower body, but they are nowhere to be seen.

Okay, then.

She slowly disentangles herself from Richie, slides out of the bed, walks quickly to her suitcase, and picks up the Keene's bag. Then she walks into the bathroom.

She is a grown-ass woman and they are all a bunch of grown-ass men and if they can't handle hearing about menstruation that's their problem and not hers, but. There's nothing louder than the chip-bag crinkle of ripping open a pad. She didn't bleed onto her underwear or her shorts, but she does wipe down the toilet carefully when she's done. Tom used to come out of the bathroom with *Again?* booming out of his chest, like he didn't understand the whole *monthly* part of the monthly cycle thing.

She wraps the used pad up in toilet paper and places it in the bottom of the wire trash can. When she's washing her hands she looks up and

Stan.

Bev freezes, cold water running over her hands. “Stanley?” she whispers.

In the mirror his eyes widen and then he looks up toward the ceiling, his mouth opening.

Beverly puts her hands on either side of the sink and takes a deep breath, still watching him in the mirror. There's blood and she's in a bathroom leaning over a drain again and she knows Stanley's dead, she knows. She closes her eyes. “I'm sorry,” she says. “I'm sorry, I can't.”

When she turns around to look again, there's nothing there. She checks the mirror once more, but she's alone.

She doesn't know how long she stands there, sobbing in the bathroom with the sink running, before someone knocks on the door.

“Bev?” Mike says.

She sniffs. “I’m fine,” she says. “I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Mike says. “Do you want to come downstairs?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Just give me a minute, I’ll be right down.”

She washes her face and brushes her teeth and doesn’t catch any other glimpses of men, dead or otherwise, in the bathroom mirror.

She comes out and Richie is still sprawled in the bed, now starfished out on the entire thing. Eddie is nowhere to be found. Mike is sitting in the desk chair and he stands up as soon as he sees her face. Bev’s complexion means she’s blotchy for hours after she cries.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

She nods. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just—” She shakes her head. “Stan.”

“I know,” Mike says.

She looks at him. “You know?”

“Yeah,” Mike says, his voice empathetic but without the urgent panic she feels.

“You’ve seen him?”

“Oh.” Mike’s mouth goes round and then he shakes his head. “I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. I—do you need a hug?”

Bev nods and Mike stoops to hug her.

“Okay,” he says. “What do you mean, you’ve seen him?”

She shakes her head and takes a step back, folding her arms around herself. “In the mirrors,” she says. “Twice now. Not like he looked when he was a kid, but the way he looked as an adult, when he...” She blinks hard, clearing her eyes again. “When I dreamed him.”

“You saw him just now?” Mike asks.

Bev glances over at Richie, who obligingly punctuates the silence with a snore.

“Let’s step outside,” Mike says.

“I need a cigarette,” Bev says. “I’m sorry, I know it’s early, I just—”

Mike shakes his head. “Yeah, do what you gotta do.”

She takes the pack of cigarettes and Ben’s lighter and throws her jacket on over her T-shirt and shorts. They walk down the stairs and past the bar, where Bill and Ben are drinking despite it being before noon. Bev turns her face away tightly before Ben can get a good look at her and keeps going.

Eddie is out on the front porch, looking frazzled with his phone to his ear. He startles when they open the door.

“Sorry,” Bev mouths.

Eddie shakes his head and ushers them forward out onto the porch. “Yes, I hear what you are saying, yes, but there’s a little thing called legal compulsion—” He grimaces and slides past them back into the Townhouse, trading places with them.

Mike sits down on one of the porch chairs. “Go ahead,” he says to Bev.

Bev takes a cigarette out of the packet and lights it up, then lays the pack down on the table. She has sixteen left.

“Is it all right if we talk about it?” Mike asks.

Bev nods and watches the mixed smoke and heat from her breath go billowing away from her. She used to play that game when she was a kid, exhaling in cold air and pretending to be a dragon. Goosebumps run up her legs and she’s going to turn vascular and purple with cold, but it’s okay because it’s real.

“You said that you saw all of us die,” Mike says.

She nods.

“Like Stan?”

She nods again.

Mike takes a deep breath. “Bev, did you see all of us kill ourselves?”

Bev turns around, presses her left hand to her mouth and holds her cigarette in her right. “I didn’t see me,” she says, because what she actually saw was Tom beating her to death, but there’s no way of knowing whether that was because of the deadlights or just because she was afraid of him. “And—I’m not sure about Richie, I don’t know whether it was on purpose, or...” *Him spasming in the back of an ambulance, the shock of the defibrillator, a paramedic calling it and stating the time.*

“Okay,” Mike says. “Okay. I’m sorry you went through that.”

She shakes her head again, her hand pressed to her lips. “It’s not your fault,” she says.

Mike is quiet for a moment and Bev watches the smoke curl off the end of the butt, forming airy loops.

“I have to ask,” he says. He takes another deep breath that echoes in his lungs and then he exhales. “How did I do it?”

Beverly closes her eyes and puts both hands on the railing. She hadn’t known who she was dreaming of, at first—not until she was in the Jade of the Orient and realizing she had known that man from her dream, that awful dream, when his blood fell from his fingertips and dripped onto her face. Now she has to try to remember Mike before she knew him—before she *remembered* she knew him, his rolled-up sleeves and his serious brows and the deep crease across his forehead. The old oversize suit jacket he laid on the back of the chair in what she thought was a museum, until she walked into the Derry Public Library and found Mike and Richie with the rest of them.

“Bev?” Mike says gently.

She opens her eyes, but it’s like Mike is overlaid with the darkness from that dream. Him stacking the books around him, his eyes frantic. Pads of yellow paper being thrown on top of the heap, an old

photograph of the Kitchener Ironworks visible on one of the covers.

“Beverly,” Mike says. “I’m sorry. I have to ask. Did I hang myself?”

He shook gasoline from the canister on the pyre, in a circle around himself, dumping it over his shoes, his jeans.

“No,” Bev says, her voice coming out in a creak. She shakes her head and blinks again. “You self-immolated. You—you stacked up all the books in the library and you burned yourself with them.”

Mike blinks once.

She wipes at her face. “Why did you—why did you ask about, about hanging?”

“That’s a thing I would never do, Beverly,” Mike says seriously. “You know that, don’t you? I would never burn myself, not in this town, not with all the books. Of all the ways I might have decided to end it, that one was never an option, not for me. Do you understand?”

She saw him, shaking the canister.

“Why hanging, Mike?”

“I had some bad times,” he says. “Here, by myself. I had some bad times and I had some good rafters. But I would never, never do it that way. If I were going to kill myself to get away from It, I wouldn’t go the way that It wanted me to, I wouldn’t run away from it straight into my worst fear.”

“So what does that mean?” Bev manages. “Why—why would I see that, if—I never thought Stan would do that either, I never thought —” She crams the cigarette back in her mouth and draws and feels her whole body relax.

Mike stares at the butt in her mouth. His gaze seems to follow the curl of the smoke.

“Stanley was rigid,” he says slowly. “There was no bend to him. No bend, no give, just those clear lines.” His eyes are very far away.

“Mike,” Bev says.

His gaze focuses abruptly. “I don’t know about the other dreams,” he says. “But the one about me—that was a lie. That wasn’t the future, that wasn’t me, that’s something I would never do. So it had to be—”

“—It,” Bev finishes, her voice quiet. “In my head. After all those years.”

Ben opens the door to the townhouse. “Hey,” he says. “The police were here—what happened?” This last as he catches sight of Bev’s face.

Ben she had seen—just another man, a handsome man, but just another man until she recognized him at last in the restaurant—behind the wheel of a car. It was dark out, but there were lights on him, and he’d been drinking his way through an entire bottle of whiskey. And then, as she watched, she’d seen the railroad crossing gates go down behind and in front of him, and heard the alarm, and heard the train horn in the distance.

“I saw Stan,” she says. “Just now.” She sounds washed-out and little girl-scared.

Ben blinks. “Where?”

“Upstairs. In the mirror. And again when you brought me the cigarettes. It’s twice now.”

Ben glances at Mike and then back at her. Something about the movement of his eyes is nervous. “Like in Neibolt?” he asks. “When It cut me?”

She closes her eyes and nods.

“Can you show me?” he asks.

They go back upstairs. Ben goes to open the door and they hear Richie say, “Hey, hey, easy.”

“Get out of bed, it’s almost noon, Rich,” Ben says.

"I am out of bed, the problem is I'm also naked, so can you give me thirty seconds, Haystack? I don't need to live knowing that you've inventoried literally every difference between the two of us; I'd feel really guilty if you had to walk around knowing how much bigger my dick is."

Ben's expression is so long-suffering that Bev almost giggles.

After a few seconds the door opens and Richie, pulling the sleeve on his outer shirt into place, pokes his head out. He glances from Ben to Bev and then his mouth opens a little bit and he nods. "Yeah, yeah, I see how it is, I spent eight years in college like everyone else. Is anyone in the bar? I need to call my agent."

"Bill was," Bev replies. "We've lost Eddie."

"There are crime scene investigators upstairs," Ben says.

Richie frowns at him and asks seriously, "Is that what gets you going, Haystack? Is that what all this—" He sweeps an arm up and down, taking in Ben's whole body. "—is for?"

Ben shoves the door open. "*Beep beep*, Richie."

Richie puts up his hands and walks down the hallway. "Make good choices," he calls over his shoulder.

Ben blinks a couple of times. "That's my friend," he says flatly. "I'm friends with that man."

Bev is happy to reflect on that particular choice with him because it means putting off going into the room and looking in the long mirror for another long-dead friend. Ben seems to realize this because he hesitates, holding the door open with his body.

"Did he look frightening?" Ben asks. "Stan? Not Richie."

Bev shakes her head. "He was just—he wearing a cardigan. He wasn't hurt. I said his name and he—" She tries to demonstrate the change that Stan's face made.

"He looked—relieved?" Ben asks.

She frowns. “Yeah. I guess that was it.” She puts her hand over her mouth again—she wishes she still had the cigarette, but she stubbed it out outside—and thinks of how she denied him, how she said *I’m sorry, I can’t*.

“Okay,” Ben says. “Are you ready?”

She’s not. She goes in.

In the mirror she can’t see anyone other than herself—pale, wearing her black jacket over her pajama shorts, and with purple vascularity up and down her legs—and Ben, looking curiously alert for a man drinking before noon, wearing his boots and his layered shirts and still watching her with those full eyes.

“Anything?” Ben asks.

She shakes her head.

Ben walks over to the mirror. “What if I—” He adjusts it slightly on the stand, tilting it up and down.

Stanley is neither on the ceiling nor on the floor.

“No,” she says. “Try side to side.”

Ben lifts the long mirror in its wooden frame and twists it so that Bev can see corners of the room.

There’s no one there.

She shakes her head. “No. I lost him. I—” Her breath catches and she covers her face.

“Hey, it’s okay.” There’s a heavy sound as Ben sets down the mirror and then he’s taking slow steps back to her. “It’s okay.”

“I didn’t remember him,” she says. “When I saw him die, I didn’t even know who he was, I didn’t know what I was losing, what we were all losing.”

“Bev—Bev, it’s okay.” He touches the back of her hand, carefully,

until she pries it away and wipes at her face again with her arm. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault. Okay? None of us chose to forget each other. It’s not your fault.”

“You didn’t forget,” she gulps. “You remembered—you remembered enough, you carried my name around for years, and I—I couldn’t even remember—”

“Can I hold you?” Ben asks. “You seem like you need to be held, can I —?”

Bev hates feeling like this, hates feeling hysterical and out of control, but she grabs hold of his shirt and plants her face in his chest.

“Okay,” Ben says. He holds onto her, his arms going around her back and shoulders. He sways slightly. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, trying to get the fraticness under control. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re allowed,” he says. “You don’t have to be sorry.”

“No,” she says, because she needs him to be upset with her right now, she can’t handle this relentless calm, “I’m sorry. I forgot about you, I forgot that you sent me—I thought it was *Bill*, I’m sorry.”

His head tucks on top of hers. He completely surrounds her. It should be terrifying. It isn’t.

“I never told you,” he says. “How could you have known if I never told you?”

“But I—” Her voice breaks. She’s so tired of crying today already. “It should have been you.”

“No,” Ben says. “No, no, no. Do you remember—hey.” He pulls away slightly. There’s no anger on his face at all, just kindness. “Do you remember when we filled up the clubhouse with smoke? And Bill and I didn’t want to let you join?”

“I remember Bill didn’t want to let me join,” she says.

“Yeah, and you turned and looked at me like, *Are you going to allow this to happen?* And I just kind of stared at you like an idiot?”

“I don’t remember that.” Why doesn’t she remember that?

“You got so angry,” he says. “You said that you were supposed to be a part of it, that you could *feel it*, and that if we didn’t let you take part you would leave. And we had to listen, after that. We couldn’t have done any of that without you.”

When she told him she wanted to have everyone in the room, he said, *I feel it too.*

“I remember Bill Denbrough at that age,” Ben says. “He’s hard to forget. He kept making speeches, even with that stutter of his, and I listened. We all listened.”

She doesn’t want to talk about Bill, Bill’s right downstairs and Bev kissed him in that lobby, she cheated on her husband, something she’d never done before, and for what?

“But when you told me about the postcard,” he says. “You didn’t say you remembered him. You said that you remembered the way you felt.”

She blinks her hot eyes shut and hides them in his shirt again. “I can’t remember how I felt,” she says. “I’m sorry, I’m just—I’m scared, and I don’t remember who I was. I remember running, and I remember fighting, but I don’t remember any of it, any of how I felt, just opening up that postcard in my bathtub and... I thought I had her back, but she’s gone again.”

“She’s not,” Ben says. “You’re not. You’re grieving. I—” He takes a step back, his hand going to the back of his head. “I didn’t remember you. I had your name, but I didn’t remember you. I used to think, who’s Beverly Marsh? But I never threw out that piece of paper. I should have, I don’t know why, and I’m glad I didn’t. But when Mike called. I remembered.”

Beverly sits down on the bed and puts her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” Ben says.

She shakes her head. She takes a deep breath and wipes under her eyes.

“My bank cards were rejected,” she says. “When I went to pay for my clothes. I had to use my Macy’s card, and that’s only in my name. And—” She takes a deep breath. “I can’t go back. Not just because of you, or because of Bill, or because of what we did here.”

She feels Ben sit down on the bed next to her. She can’t look at him. If she has to look at him, she’ll lose her nerve.

“Before I left,” she says, “I told him that if he tried to stop me going, I would kill him. And then I flipped my vanity table at him, and then I took his belt, and I whipped him across the balls.”

Ben is silent.

“So I can’t go back,” she says. “Not ever, I don’t think. And I don’t have any money, and it’s not fair, and it’s my fault—”

“No,” Ben says calmly.

“It is,” she says. “It is, this is what I do to people, it’s what I did to my dad—”

“No.”

“It’s what I did to my college boyfriend, he just all of a sudden—” She gestures toward her own face.

“Beverly.”

He doesn’t touch her with his hands, but his knee is pressed into hers.

“I’m not who you remember,” she says. “I’m not that girl, I’m just...”

Alvin Marsh. She’s Alvin Marsh’s daughter, and she’s been hunting him down ever since she left him that first time. She can’t tell Ben all the things that Tom did because he’ll look at her kindly and he’ll hate Tom for her and she’ll have to live with knowing what *she* did, not just to make him hit her but after.

“You were the only person to sign my yearbook,” Ben says.

Bev lowers her hands, looks at the gentle expression on his face, and then pitches herself sideways into his lap. Her ear lands on his thigh; he’s not as soft as he once was, but his fingers sink into her hair, which is still wild and unbrushed, and begin combing it out.

“Anything you need, just take it,” he says. “I’ll pay your way. I have enough. Too much for just me. I won’t even miss it. I’ll give you one of my cards if you want. And you don’t have to go back. I have—” His free hand waves over her head, gesturing out into empty air. “—places, you don’t have to stay with me if you don’t want to—”

“I want to,” she says selfishly, and then buttons her lip, startled at herself.

Ben lowers his head to kiss her temple. “Okay,” he says. “Then we’ll go together. That’s what we’ll do.”

She lays there curled up in his lap for a while, with him stroking her hair. She used to hate when people touched her hair—she cut it all off in a panic that summer, because of the way it made people look at her, because of the way her father grabbed the end of her ponytail. She hated him and she cried in the bathroom and she hacked away at her hair in the mirror. But the postcard. That made her feel something else.

Speaking of hacking, there’s a weird rhythmic thump from downstairs.

She sits up slowly.

“Do you hear that?” she asks Ben.

When she goes downstairs to check, Richie is in the bar by himself. He has picked up one of the fancy chairs from the bar set, and he is apparently pulling the old *Welcome to the Losers’ Club, asshole!* on the radio.

She creeps down a few steps, completely thrown by this display. Every time he lifts the chair over his head the legs come within dangerous reach of the ceiling. The radio has ceased making any

noise, and instead is breaking into pieces.

When he sees her he drops the chair abruptly and puts his forearms on it, leaning down and panting. Then he braces one hand on the back and straightens up. They make eye contact for a long moment.

“We’re just gonna have to buy this fucking hotel, aren’t we?” Richie asks.

The chair snaps to pieces. Richie drops with it. He manages not to impale himself, but his face and eyes go white and he doesn’t get up.

“Oh my god,” Bev says, and stumbles down the last several steps. Ben comes right on her heels. “Richie? Richie!”

“Fine,” Richie wheezes, the wind definitely knocked out of him. His mouth opens and gulps like a fish drowning.

“Okay, okay.” Ben stoops to try to haul Richie to his feet but Richie sinks his nails into Ben’s forearm, shaking his head. “You have to sit up, man, there’s no way you’ll get your breath back—”

“Can’t move,” Richie says.

There’s a sickening moment where Bev is sure he’s paralyzed.

“Does it hurt?” Ben asks. “Rich, where does it hurt?”

“Side,” Richie manages.

Ben puts his hand on Richie’s side and Richie makes a pained sound.

“Okay,” Ben says. “Okay. You threw your back out. It’s all right, you’re gonna be okay.”

“Fucking damn it,” Richie says. “Things were supposed to be getting back to normal.”

Bev is actually somewhat relieved by how normal this emergency is.

Ben and Mike half-carry Richie out to his car.

He keeps insisting that he can walk and then clearly proving that was a lie. Eventually he gives up and Mike puts him in the car. Bev ran back upstairs for the keys.

“You need anything, man?”

“Yeah, a *new musculoskeletal system*,” Richie snarls.

Ben raises his eyebrows, impressed. That’s a lot of syllables for Richie.

“Fresh out,” Mike says. “Bev’s gonna take you to the hospital, get you some drugs.”

“I knew she was my favorite for a reason.” Richie tilts his head back.

Bev comes down the Townhouse steps, brandishing Richie’s keys in her hand. “Okay,” she says. “Okay, we’re ready to go.”

“Dear oh dear, let’s get to it,” Richie mumbles.

Bev pauses in getting in the car to kiss Ben—he’s thrown but he returns it, obviously—and when she lets go of his collar Richie is clearly playing dead in the front seat. He’s got his tongue hanging out of his mouth and everything.

“Oh no, Richie’s dead,” Ben observes impassively.

“Worth it,” Bev says. She throws herself into the driver’s seat and adjusts it so she can fit her feet to the pedals.

Richie starts up with a “Hey—ow.”

“Ben, honey, can you clean up the bits of chair in this lobby before someone sees?”

She called him *honey*.

“Who?” Ben asks. No one works at this damn hotel, and the only possible witness is the police guard, who seems remarkably unconcerned about the massive destruction of property and the medical emergency taking place downstairs.

Eddie, who came down the steps of the Townhouse after Bev, pauses and throws both arms up over his head. “The fuck, Richard?” he bellows across the parking lot.

“Step on it,” Richie says. He gives a *Her Majesty*-style wave to Eddie.

Bev buckles her seatbelt. “Can one of you—”

“I can do it—*motherfucker*—”

Ben leans down and buckles Richie into the passenger seat. “Drive safely,” he tells Bev.

She was only just crying and melting down. He should feel guilty about just sending her off with *Richie* of all people. But the look on her face when she announced she was going to get Richie’s keys was reassuring—the same steely-eyed conviction with which she said *This kills monsters*. The same dead eye she had when she pointed the slingshot at It, a long time ago, and Ben fell in love with her.

She said she didn’t recognize herself, but Ben can see her. He just knows it’s not the right time. If she needs a distraction to get her mind off her fears, then by all means, Richie Tozier is a professional distraction.

She turns out of the parking lot and onto the main drag with great confidence and with Richie continuing to play dead in the passenger seat.

“He killed the radio,” Mike says.

Ben nods. They begin ascending the steps back up to the porch, where Eddie still looks incredulous. Bill has come out by now to watch the spectacle, his hands in his pockets.

“Did he hear something?” Mike asks.

Now would be the time to ask Mike about Bev’s vision of Stan. He might already know it, considering that Bev was talking to him when Ben came out on the porch and saw her all teary-eyed. But looking at Bill and Eddie, he’s not sure. It’s not that he wants to hide it from them, it’s just that—

Bev cried.

He doesn't want to tell them about it, because if he does, he'll have to tell them how badly it upset her. And he doesn't think he gets to make that call, even with them.

"He said he just hates Rilo Kiley," Ben replies. "What else can we do to this hotel? Bill, you wanna, like, drive Mike's truck through the lobby, just to finish making our mark on our new clubhouse?"

Would that bring the management out from wherever they're hiding? Would that bring the police guard downstairs? Would seeing novelist William Denbrough committing property damage via automobile finally move the Derry Police, or just send the guard creeping back upstairs?

Why isn't anyone taking notice of them?

It reminds Ben of something, but he can't quite work out what. Someone seeing something terrible happening and just driving away.

"Maybe later," Bill says. He looks grim, but he holds the door open for them as they go back inside. As Ben passes through it he says quietly, "So I have to go home soon."

Both Mike and Eddie turn around to look at him. Eddie looks pale but he says nothing.

The door swings shut behind Ben.

Bill goes on. "Because I think the staff writers just took over the movie, and I think my wife will leave me if I don't get my ass back home eventually—or worse, she'll show up here, and I can't..." He sighs. "I can't have Audra here."

Ben understands. There's something contaminating about Derry, even after it. Something that clings to the walls of these buildings, something that has him looking up, convinced that someone has just walked out of the room and if he only follows—

The car, he remembers suddenly. When Bowers had him on the bridge, when Bowers was cutting into Ben's stomach and his friends

were panicking because they had no idea that he was going to go this far. There was a car. Was it an old couple inside? An old man? A woman? Just two married people?

They stopped, and they looked at the blood sluicing down from Ben's fat belly, and then they drove on.

That's what this Townhouse feels like. Like nobody can see them, no matter what happens.

If Ben felt even a little more trapped in here, he'd be calling for a taxi to take him to Bangor. But Bev wanted them all to stay here, all in the same room. *Sleepover. High school rules.* And she was right, he knew that in the moment. It's just harder to remember when she and Richie are gone, when it's just the four of them.

Maybe the five of us.

"You coming back for the trial?" Mike asks.

"Of course I'm coming back," Bill says.

He saw neither of the attacks, but his absence is part of their alibi. The police are intimidated—Ben isn't sure if it's the whole international fame thing or if it's because he pulled the Georgie card in front of that officer—but Ben isn't sure if that's going to last once he's gone. Bev and Richie are both famous, but Ben's known for making things and not allowing people to see his face. William Denbrough's photograph is on the back of all his books, in black and white that hides the way his hair is thinning. He's the King of Horror.

"If you remember," Mike says.

Bill shakes his head. "You better call me before it happens. Don't let me walk away and forget."

"Okay," Mike sighs.

But the rest of them don't have Bill's charisma. Certainly not Ben. If they rely on Richie to do their talking for them, both Richie and Mike will be in jail by October.

Bill is looking at Eddie. “You good, man?”

The queasy look on Eddie’s face makes it seem like Eddie’s thinking along the same lines.

“Fine,” he says. He turns slowly and goes up the stairs, his movements stiff.

“We need to talk to you,” Mike says. “Before you go.”

Ben turns his head to look at Mike, a little surprised, but willing to go along with it.

“Now?” Bill asks. Not disappointed or annoyed, just serious.

Mike nods.

Bill looks at Ben and then turns to the bar. “Is in here fine?”

“Yeah,” Mike says.

Ben follows. He remembers the broken chair as soon as he sees it lying in pieces, its upholstery clinging defunctly to the severed legs and back. The radio is smashed into irregular chunks there as well. There are deep scratches in the hardwood.

“He couldn’t have murdered it on the carpet?” Ben mutters as he kicks the pieces into a pile.

“It can wait,” Mike says. He looks at Bill.

Bill sits down and puts both hands over the arms of the chair. He nods, indicating he’s ready to hear whatever they have to say. It’s an effortless regal gesture.

“Beverly saw Stan kill himself,” Mike says. “But she also saw me kill myself. I think she saw all of us kill ourselves, but the way she described me doing it, it’s impossible.”

Ben feels like Mike just slapped him across the face.

“What did she see you do?” Bill asks.

Ben, still reeling, stares at Mike.

“She saw me stack up all the books in the library and light them and myself on fire,” Mike says. “I’m not gonna say I’m a pinnacle of mental health, but you both know I’d never do that, right?”

“With the fire?” Bill asks. “Or never kill yourself?”

Mike closes his eyes. “I’ve got my whole life ahead of me now, man. I just have to survive this trial, and then I’m gone.”

Now Ben stares at Mike for a different reason. He’s been mostly keeping to himself and Bill since he got here—since they all betrayed him by trying to walk away after the Chinese restaurant and the fortune cookies from hell. Ben hasn’t been paying enough attention, and he never guessed...

But Bill doesn’t look surprised. “But you’d never use fire. And you’d never destroy the books.”

“No,” Mike says. “That’s not me at all.”

Bill’s jaw shifts from side to side. Then he looks at Ben. “What did she tell you?”

It’s almost accusatory. Ben bristles and then forces himself to relax.

“She saw Stanley here, in the Townhouse, in the mirrors,” he says. “Twice. This morning and the day I went to Bangor.”

“Saw him killing himself?”

Ben shakes his head. “Just a man,” he says. “Who wasn’t there when she looked.”

“Wearing a cardigan?” Bill asks.

Mike blinks. “Do you see him too?”

Bill’s mouth opens and his tongue runs over his teeth. “That’s what I do, isn’t it? I thrust my f-f-fists—” He bites down on the word hard and then swallows. “Yes,” he finishes. “I thought I saw him.”

“He’s here,” Mike says.

Ben closes his eyes. He listens for footsteps. He doesn’t know anything about hauntings, but they’ve made this their space, haven’t they? If Stanley’s going to be anywhere, it’s either going to be in Georgia with his widow or it’s going to be here with them.

“How?” Bill asks.

Mike shakes his head. “Do you believe you killed It?”

And that’s terrifying. Ben is suddenly back in the dark, his headlamp getting dimmer and dimmer, smashing through eggs every time he takes a step because he doesn’t have any steps to spare, doesn’t have any time to waste. If his legs give out here he has to lie down and die on top of the last of the eggs, he has to fall and crush them with his weight, he has to stop this from ever happening again—

“*Ben*,” Bill says, his voice like iron.

Ben blinks and the blue light of the bar room comes back into his eyes. Bill’s eyes are very bright.

“Yes,” Bill says. “I crushed Its heart in my hands. Eddie hurt It and It ran away, and then Richie and I chased after it, and I crushed Its heart in my hands.”

“You’re sure?” Ben asks quietly. Bill came out of the tunnel with Richie slung over his shoulders, looking like he was dragging a body. Ben had never expected that Bill Denbrough could lift Richie Tozier. “You weren’t distracted, trying to get out?”

“No,” Bill says. “We did what we came to do. If I’m s-s-s—*shit*.” His eyes close.

He looks young, there. His hair glows red.

“If,” he says slowly, trying again, “I am sure of anything. I am sure that we killed It.”

Ben looks at the toes of his boots. “I’m not sure,” he whispers.

“Of what?” Bill asks.

“That I killed them all,” he says. “That I crushed the eggs.”

In the silence, he feels Mike and Bill looking at him. He wishes he had one of his old sweatshirts to shrug on, layers to put between himself and their scrutiny. He reaches out and takes hold of his own elbows, lets the warmth from his palms soak into his skin, and then puts his hands down.

“You went to battle with It,” Mike says. “In the Ritual of Chuïd. You and Richie. Did you outnumber It?”

Bill closes his eyes. “Are you asking how many I saw?”

“I’m saying,” Mike says, “that in all the years It’s been alive, there’s only ever been one of It. It changed, and It had more than one body, but It was always the same thing. And I’m saying that I saw It arrive on earth, I saw where It came down. It was... before time.”

“And how long before it started killing?”

“Centuries,” Mike says. “A thousand years. Earliest documentation I have is 1719. The Panawahpsek have stories. But.” He turns to Ben. “Even if you didn’t manage to get them all. We don’t know how long it would take for one to grow and mature and—”

“Get hungry,” Ben interrupts.

The words sink into the carpet.

“We can’t worry about that,” Bill says. “We might never know. Either way, what’s the likelihood that It’s prancing around as Stan to frighten us?” His gaze flicks across to the bar and then back to them, like he thinks Stan might appear in the room.

“I don’t know,” Mike replies.

Ben closes his eyes. “She said he wasn’t frightening.”

“What?”

He opens his eyes again. “She said he wasn’t frightening. No severed heads or spider legs. He opened his mouth when she said his name.”

“Like he was trying to speak to her?” Mike asks.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know,” Ben replies.

Bill closes his eyes and leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees and his hand to his head. “I have to go. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“Man, we understand,” Mike says. “As long as you come back for the trial. We need you. I don’t think we can do this all alone.”

“I’ll come back,” Bill says. “I’ll do what I have to, but I’ll come back. I just—” He grimaces and then looks at Ben. “Anything happens, you need anything, you can call me. I don’t want to go.”

“I know,” Ben says. He looks at Mike, exchanging a glance, and then back at Bill. “We both know.”

Bill stands up and takes hold of Mike’s sleeves, right where the cuffs are rolled up on his forearms. “You’ve kept the lookout for so long,” he says. “You’re like a lighthouse. It’s almost over.”

“I know,” Mike says. “One way or the other, it’s almost over.”

They hug abruptly. Ben thinks Bill might be on the verge of tears. Then Bill reaches out for him, and Ben goes into the hug.

“I’m sorry,” Bill says. “I don’t want to go.”

“You have to,” Ben says. “It’ll be okay.”

“I’ll call you every day, man, if that’s what it takes,” Mike says. “Wake you up in the middle of the night, with a *who am I?*”

Bill smiles. He puts a hand on Ben’s shoulder. His eyes are bright.

“You can take care of them while I’m gone, right?” he asks. He glances back at Mike. “Not that you haven’t done that so far, just—”

“The rich white boy not entwined in the murder trial right now,”

Mike says, waving a hand. “I get it, I get it. I could use a break, too.”

Ben nods. “We can last,” he says. “Until you get back.”

“I’m used to keeping the watch,” Mike says.

“The home fires,” Ben says, though he doesn’t know where it came from. He thinks of Bev’s confession that her husband cut her off, that she has nothing, and of Mike’s conviction about his own method of suicide. “I can take a turn.”

“Well.” Bill straightens and tilts his head back, looking up at the light. “I’m not going yet. I’ll probably book my flight tonight and see when’s most convenient—it’s a bitch of a time flying to England, and I actually came through Georgia on my way here.” He smiles. “Can you believe that? I c-c-c—” His consonants drown out into a plunging guttural sound as he tries to force it, and then he drops his head, suddenly looking very tired. “In another life,” he says instead. “I might have run into Stan.”

“Maybe so,” Mike says.

Ben hears footsteps upstairs, but it could be Eddie moving around, or it could be the guard. They seem careful and measured, but there’s no sign that Mike or Bill heard them. Not even the flicker of an eyelash.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, I'm going to a wedding this weekend, so I don't anticipate to get much writing done (there will be drinking and axe-throwing, and I'm not gonna lie, I can write any day, but the axe-throwing has a limited window). I do promise, however, to think about this story really hard. I plan to get back on Sunday and then my goal will be to have a chapter up Monday, but that's all dependent on a lot of variables.

Thank you so much for your positive responses to this sequel. I really appreciate it.

3. Out of the Ether

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben takes Bev on a date. Bev makes a run to the ER, and then a phone call.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay the wedding's in like two and a half hours but I have no self-control and also I was fantasizing about this chapter on the ride up and I've been completely ignoring my very bored date the entire time I've been here.

Content warnings: Richie on muscle relaxers, mention of drug abuse and overdose, mentions of infidelity, food, suicide imagery (Stan), canonical violence, domestic abuse (Tom).

Bev goes to the ER in her pajama shorts and a suit jacket.

“No,” Richie says, disbelieving. “Are they really?” The way he’s looking ought to make her uncomfortable, but she’s been literally sharing a bed with him for days and Richie hasn’t so much as had an errantly-placed hand. Instead he seems genuinely fascinated by the small blue flowers on her shorts.

She adjusts the cuffs of her sleeves, making sure they hang down over her wrists. The bruises have turned green and yellow by now, but she doesn’t want a repeat of the nurses singling her out.

Richie seems to realize how hard he’s staring at her legs, because he looks back up at her eyes again and then bobs his head, leaning back against the chair. He’s propped up at what has to be a desperately uncomfortable angle. “I just figured that was the fashionable thing, I don’t know *dick* about dressing well.” Bev glances around to make sure there are no children in this ER waiting room. “There’s a blog out there—*Richie Tozier needs a change of clothes.*”

“Seriously?” Bev asks.

Richie grimaces. “Yep. First post I saw—it’s just me at three different events, and I’m wearing the same shirt. And it’s not even a good shirt. And they happened, like, *years* apart. You’re a bigshot fashion designer, aren’t you? What do you think you can do with *this*?” He puts one hand under his chin and mugs for her.

Bev giggles.

“I didn’t pack to stand trial,” Richie says. “Don’t let me walk in there looking like an asshole.”

“Well, no clothes will change who you are.”

“Yowza!” Richie grins at her and lets his arms fall back down to his sides.

“And the clothes you’ll look and feel best in will just accentuate your personality, so...”

“So I can kiss my ass goodbye.”

Bev rolls her eyes a little but smiles. “We’ll take you to buy a suit. Have to go somewhere big and tall for Mike, anyway.” She puts on her analytical eyes, measuring his shoulders, but it’s difficult with the slouch he’s in. “Maybe you too, actually. I’m not the best tailor, it’s been a while, but I remember how to do it.”

Richie’s eyebrows lift and he bobs his head from side to side. “Mm, so all I have to do to get a custom-made suit from Beverly Marsh is k—”

“Custom-fitted is not the same as custom-made, I’m not sewing you a suit, Richie,” Bev says, interrupting him before he can say *kill a man* in the waiting room. But for a moment she imagines a suit jacket in her lap, putting in her stitches. Like she can fit them into armor. Is that the magic? If she makes it with her own hands, can she defend them?

A nurse comes through the door. “Richard?”

Richie raises his hand. “That’s me.” He braces both arms on the chair

and his face does something weirder than usual. “Oh, I’m gonna need help.”

“Okay,” Bev says, and gets up and grabs his forearm. The nurse comes over too, despite being roughly Bev’s height, and they haul Richie to his feet. Getting him out of the car was a trip and a half; Bev should have anticipated this and made Ben come with her.

She tugs her sleeves back into place again.

The doctor assumes that Bev is Richie’s wife, which makes Richie laugh.

“No,” Bev says. “Just a friend.”

“You think that *she’d* be interested in me?” Richie asks. “You know the first thing she said to me, hadn’t seen me in thirty years—” His voice pitches up and fills the whole exam room, like he’s shouting over the table at the Chinese restaurant again. *“There’s no way Richie’s married.”* Bev recognizes her own tone.

The doctor looks at Bev. “Did he hit his head?”

Bev puts her fingertips to her mouth and shakes her head no. “He’s just like this.”

“Never *just* a friend, Beverly, a *best* friend,” Richie says in his own voice again, a little airlessly.

And despite herself Bev is touched by that.

The doctor gives strict instructions about how the muscle relaxers are to be handled, and directs them to the in-house pharmacy. He also implies that maybe Bev should hang on to the bottle, if it’s likely that Richie might forget he’s taken one. The nervous flicks of his gaze indicate he *strongly* wants to do a concussion test.

Richie leans on the wall as they wait at the pharmacy. He says he’s afraid that if he sits down he won’t get back up, but Bev’s aware that she’s almost a full foot shorter than him and there’s no nurse with the upper-body strength of a deadlifter to drag him out of the chair and into the car this time.

“You ever done drugs?” she asks Richie, picking at the button on her sleeve. There’s a loose thread through one of the holes. She wants to fix it, but she doesn’t have a sewing kit. It is suddenly incredibly important that she fixes the button; she can’t keep her fingers off it.

Richie makes a face and glances at the currently unmanned pharmacy window. “What, you mean, like, hard stuff? No, I’m a pussy, I did cocaine at a party when I was like in my twenties and—” He shakes his head. “—my brain is already so out of control, except it was like someone yanked out my emergency brake.”

This helps with the stress image Bev has been having of Richie in the back of an ambulance, receiving defibrillation and with an oxygen mask over his face. She doesn’t know what she saw him overdose on, has a vague idea that cocaine is an upper and there are other things out there that might slow him down, but now’s probably not the time for that interrogation.

“You have an emergency brake?” she asks.

“Yeah, it’s—” He flips her off, which makes her laugh. Then he shakes his head. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He wouldn’t hesitate to fuck around like that with any of the others. It’s comforting that he does the same with her.

Richie bobs his head and shrugs a little.

They get his pills. He stops at one of the vending machines and gets a water, and Bev metes out his single pill with a ritual seriousness that reminds her of communion. Richie clearly has the same thought, because he bows to her and says, “The body of Christ.”

“Beep beep, Richie.”

By the time they’re halfway back to the Derry Townhouse, he’s definitely out of it.

“You’re just a good dude, Bev,” he says.

“Thank you, honey.”

"I like—took you to the movies and you showed me how to walk the dog, I didn't have any excuse to return that fucking defective yo-yo." He pauses. "Can you still do yo-yo tricks?"

"I don't know. It's been a while." But she can remember the way the cord felt between her hands. Is that where it happened? The impulse towards cloth, to run it between her hands, to feel thread winding up on the bobbin? People asked her when she applied to the fine arts program how long she had wanted to do fashion design, and she didn't have an answer for them.

How long have you wanted to control what people see when they look at you?

Oh, forever.

"You should open for me," Richie says. "Onstage. Like, you come out and do all these goddamn amazing yo-yo tricks—"

Bev laughs.

"—and then we just pack it in for the night, it'd be better than my show."

"Are we going on tour?"

"Yes," Richie says with such fervent intensity that Bev laughs again. "Yes, come back with me, we'll go on tour, we'll tour the whole country, you can bring Haystack along as your manservant, and Mike can come, and Bill can write, and they can all come to our shows in the evening, it'll be great."

"What's Eddie going to do?"

"Eddie—" Richie falls silent. Bev sees him rubbing at his face in her peripheral vision. "I think he's going back."

Bev frowns. "Back where?"

"Back to his life," Richie says. "Back to his *wife*, and his corporate job from the land before fun." He sounds so sulky about it that it's hard to believe he's a grown man in the passenger seat, toe swiping

aimlessly around the footwell.

“But he’s in New York,” Bev says. She doesn’t want to think about people going back to their marriages. “So you would see him all the time, right? There’s a big comedy scene in New York.”

“Yeah,” Richie says doubtfully. Then he says, “Are you going back, Bev?”

Bev adjusts her grip on the steering wheel. “No, Richie.”

“That’s good,” Richie says. “You should stay with Haystack—I mean, the yearbook thing was a little weird, but I think it’ll be better. You should stay with him.”

“I think I’m going to,” Bev replies.

“Good, good, good,” Richie says. “These drugs are...” He sighs. “Very, very... making me sleepy?”

“We’re almost back to the hotel,” Bev says. “You can lay down.”

He does that, as soon as they get up the stairs and back into the room. He’s moving a lot better now, even if he sounds like a drunk college student, and Bev braces him on the way up as they take the stairs one at a time. The four others are waiting for them in the room and greet them as though they’ve just sailed the northwest passage. Richie drops down onto the bed and begins singing nursery rhymes at Eddie.

“I’ll have what he’s having,” Ben says seriously, his eyes a little wide. He’s sitting on Bev’s side of the bed and staring incredulously at Richie collapsed beside him.

Bev gestures to either side of her head, indicating just how out of it he is. She puts the keys back down on the nightstand.

“I’ll pay off the bar tab when I go,” Bill says. It makes sense, because they’ve all been drinking a lot. It’ll be a large tab, but one less thing to worry about when she has no access to her own money and she’s been steadily drinking her way through the vodka.

“You’re going?” she asks Bill.

Richie was just talking about Eddie, but somehow she completely forgot about Bill and his wife. God, at least when she kissed Ben she was only cheating on Tom, and fuck Tom anyway, but there’s this woman out there that Bill still loves and they hurt together.

“Soon,” he says. “I bet I got fired from my screenwriting gig, but my wife misses me.”

Is he going to tell her? He has to tell her, right? How can he not tell her? She averts her eyes to focus on Richie, who has gone surprisingly quiet *exactly when it’s least convenient for her*.

“Your wife,” she repeats. “The actress.” She and Tom saw one of her movies once. “Audrey?”

“Audra,” Bill replies. “Audra Phillips. Too good for me by half, you know how it is.”

No. No, Bev doesn’t know how it is.

Except maybe.

“Maybe I do, now,” she offers.

Ben looks up at her and gives her favorite old smile. “Never,” he says. Like he isn’t too good for Bev. Like he’s ever cheated on a woman once in his life, or hit her across the face for smoking. He breaks the eye contact and leans back on the bed, where he elbows Richie in the knee. “Hey, Rich. Rich.”

Richie does not move.

“Trashmouth.”

Richie turns his head slowly and then says in apparent delight, “Haystack! You got hot. What’re you doing in bed with *me*?”

Does Bev need to be worried about his shit-talking himself when he’s high and when he’s not? Is that something to keep an eye on? Maybe she should ask Ben later.

"You climbed in with me," Ben replies patiently. He removes Richie's glasses and leans across him to put them on the nightstand, then draws back and folds his hands over his abdomen like they're relaxing on the beach.

He still has Richie's undivided and huge-eyed attention, and Richie starts laughing a moment later. "Not fucking fair, Haystack. You got, like, a company, too—you oughta be selling, like, watches, or cologne, man. I mean *advertisements*. Did you see that Brad Pitt one years ago? He just goes on and says *I am very attractive* and then they show the name of the cologne. That's what you should be doing. Bev—" His head lifts and he looks around the room in every direction except hers, and instead raises his voice as if she might be in the bathroom or something. "Bev, tell your man here he ought to be selling cologne."

Bev is reasonably sure Ben could sell any number of things if he cared to, but she doubts he cares to. "You ought to be selling cologne," she repeats.

Ben gives a rueful smile and turns his head away. "That's what I hear." He sits up on the end of the bed again and puts his hands over his stomach. "I oughta be selling salad mixes, if anything. I've been eating like garbage and drinking too much, damn."

That strikes a note in Bev's head—she's not sure why. He got bashful when they talked about all the weight he lost in the restaurant too, but then he redirected the conversation to Stanley and Stan's empty chair.

Bev glances toward the mirror, but it's turned at an angle she can't see into. Bill could, probably, but she's not about to ask him how many people he sees in the reflection.

"Yeah, I'll pay the bar tab," Bill says again. "And for the chair and the radio, thanks so much, Richie."

Without looking up Richie replies, "You're w-w-welcome, B-big Bill."

Bev glances at Eddie, who is sitting in the desk chair and turning his phone over and over in his hands, staring at Ben. She wonders what

he's thinking.

"Beep beep, Richie," Bill says, and Eddie nods once and then lowers his head to his screen.

Ben wakes, as he does most days, when Bev steps over him.

He keeps opening his eyes to seeing her foot, carefully placed so as not to disturb the edge of his blanket nest, and then he closes his eyes again and lets her have her privacy as she goes over to her suitcase and pulls out clothes and takes her stuff with her into the bathroom. When he hears the water flick on he tries to go back to sleep, because she doesn't need him creepily listening to her take a shower. Some days it works better than others. Today he wakes when she opens the bathroom door up again and creeps behind him to put her pajamas back into her suitcase.

Then she walks over to him.

"You awake?" she whispers.

Ben opens his eyes. There's old polish chipping off her square toenails; it's navy blue and makes her skin look even paler than ever.

He gives a jerky nod, feeling out of his depth.

She kneels and smiles at him. "Take me on a date," she says.

Immediately he's wide awake. "Okay," he says. "Now?" If she wants him to get dressed and get in the car, he'll do it, but he always assumed that if he ever got to have a date with Beverly Marsh he'd be *showered* for it.

Her smile widens a little bit, showing her teeth, and her copper eyelashes flutter closed as she laughs silently. "Breakfast," she says. "I can wait for you to get ready."

"Okay," Ben says stupidly.

She leans down and kisses him on the cheek and Ben tries not to

breathe on her with his sleep-thick mouth. Then she's up again and going into the corner, picking up her boots, and then the door is closing behind her.

Ben waits for his heart rate to return to normal, realizes that isn't going to happen, and gets up and takes a shower and brushes his teeth. He staggers back out in his boxers and then frantically combs through his suitcase looking for a pair of jeans he hasn't ruined on a build site.

"Richie," he says.

Richie continues to sleep the sleep of the drugged.

"Richie, I need your keys."

From the other side of the bed, Mike says, "Take mine." Ben hunches, not having realized anyone else was up. "Bring me something back, though."

He puts on his shirt quickly. "Sure. Anything specific?"

"Pancakes," Mike replies.

Ben can do that. He dresses rapidly, grabs his wallet and his phone, and then walks around to take the keys to Mike's truck from the nightstand.

He doesn't know how long Mike has been awake, but he's curled up on the pallet and using Bill as a pillow. In his hand is his e-reader.

"Thanks, Mikey," Ben says.

Mike nods slowly, his eyes serious. "Just remember, man."

Hand on the door, Ben pauses.

"She likes you." Mike returns his gaze to his screen.

Ben waits for the rest of it, but Mike just glances at him like *What are you still doing here?* and Ben realizes that's the whole thing. "Thank you, Mike." He takes the keys and follows Bev out the door.

She's waiting in the hallway, which he did not expect. He pauses with his phone in his hand, getting ready to open up *breakfast places near me* or something equivalent, but then she's reeling him in by the hips.

He knows that look. That's a look he gets to know, now.

She leans her head back and he bends and kisses her, opening up for her, and her fingers are in his belt loop and carding up into his hair. She smells like the same soap as he does, the same shampoo, and something in his head reels to think *we're the same now*, her hair wet and drying soft instead of into crisp curls from the quarry water. He slides his hand along her cheek and just holds her there, until she puts both arms around his neck and shifts in something like frustration and pulls back.

"Ben," she says, his name coming out in a breathless scrape that he feels all the way down his back. "Too tall, come on."

"Oh," Ben says, and gets with the program, one arm under her knee and lifting her up. She laughs as her feet leave the ground but stifles it immediately, and Ben tries to keep her off the wall for fear of crushing her or making her feel trapped.

Bev apparently has neither of these concerns, because now her legs are winding around his hips and she's settling her weight onto his pelvis.

He can't say anything at all; he hisses and then he gives up and turns and leans against the wall for dear life, holding her to him with one forearm under her butt and the other across the small of her back. He catches the flash of her smile before they're kissing again and Ben closes his eyes and holds her tight and parts his lips when her tongue runs along the seam. He keeps his hips ruthlessly still and everything still feels hot and damp and good. When she nips at his lower lip he feels his eyes roll back in his head and his hand fist in her blouse.

One of her thumbs brushes over his cheek and she pulls back. Ben blinks his eyes open and stares at her, dazed. Up close her eyes are very green and her pupils dark. He's panting slightly. Should he have shaved? Is it putting her off? She's not wearing makeup and he can't believe he gets to see her like this. He loves her *eyelashes*, the way her

lips are strawberry red.

“You’re sweet,” she says, her voice barely above a murmur.

He doesn’t feel sweet; he feels like he could burn up like a candle.

“Do you want...?” he manages. There’s a room upstairs—he didn’t buy condoms—why didn’t he buy condoms?—but she said breakfast—and this hotel is both haunted and populated by five of their closest friends and no one works here and if anyone finds them like this in the hallway he doesn’t want them to see her—these jeans might not have been wrecked on a build site but they are definitely too tight now, there’s a zipper digging into his cock, but that’s better than grinding on her in a public hallway. She deserves a *bed*, come on, get it together.

She kisses him again, short and soft. Then she unlocks her ankles and he helps to ease her down onto her feet. She absolutely drags against his whole body as she goes; and he twitches in mixed embarrassment and response to how *soft* she is, god.

She holds both hands up. “Come here. Let me fix your hair.”

He inclines his head and lets her comb it out with her fingers. It’s already drying. Part of him wouldn’t mind walking around with cowlicks put there by her hands, but there’s something to be said for her riling him up and then putting him back together. When she’s satisfied he lifts his head slightly and she runs her knuckles across his cheek again.

“You still smile the same,” she says.

He has to kiss her again after that, long and slow and putting his heart into it.

She combs her hair down next with her fingers. He would offer to do it for her but she takes a slight step back and asks, “Do you know where to go for breakfast?”

Not the place Bill got him drip coffee. Ben gets out his phone and does a rapid search, then digs Mike’s keys out of his pocket again. As he shifts to get his hand there he catches her grinning, looking at his

fly, and part of him is mortified, but... if she's proud of her work, he's not going to apologize for it.

He holds up the keys, metal keyring between his fingers. "Mike loaned me his truck in exchange for pancakes."

"Then I guess we better get him some pancakes," Bev replies.

Mike's truck is old and rust-red, but when Ben runs a hand across the metal he thinks it was just painted that color. It's in good condition—not surprising, Mike is meticulous—and when he opens the door it smells of old leather and good soil. He looks through the cab to where Bev has the passenger door opened, wondering what she makes of it.

"I kind of love it," Bev says, like she can read his mind. She climbs up onto the bench seat and leans back, tilting her head so that her hair falls back. It's curling toward the right, he sees now, without brush or hot iron or anything to tend to it. Red hair and wrinkled white blouse and new jeans. God, she's beautiful. "I feel like we ought to be driving through the woods."

"I told the tech at Verizon we had to buy six phones because we were in a horrible geocaching accident," he says. He climbs into the driver's seat and tries to close the door, but it needs to be slammed. She sits up when he gets it shut and slams her own door shut.

"A geocaching accident?"

"Yeah. Eddie really sold it though, sitting there with his gauze patch."

"Who gets a facial injury geocaching?"

"Apparently, Eddie," Ben replies.

Bev smiles. Her lips are still swollen.

Ben jerks his eyes to the dashboard and finds a black and white auxiliary cord, which he plugs into his phone so the GPS can tell him where to turn. "Do you want to play navigator, or DJ?"

Bev perks up. “DJ?”

He passes his phone to her and says, “I have Spotify, and barring the usual Maine reception.”

“On it,” Bev replies.

The GPS instructs them to proceed to the highlighted route. Ben buckles in, mentally readjusts to driving a stick shift, and takes off the parking brake. Bev is quiet, her fingers with their short-bitten nails scrolling over the phone screen.

He actually jumps when the drums kick in. “No,” he groans, mortified.

Bev laughs, but it’s not an unkind laugh. She sounds happy. “Oh yes. Do you still know all the words?”

The rhythmic *oh-oh-oh-oh-ohs* of “Hangin’ Tough” come out of the speakers.

“Oh, you know I still know all the words,” Ben says, laughing. “You better put on ‘80s Baby’ after that, though.”

“Can you do all the rap breaks?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“If I ever want you to kiss me again, I better not do the rap breaks.”

“Are you *sure* of that, though?”

What Ben wants to say is *God, I love you*, but he covers his mouth instead. Bev sings along. When they get out of the car Ben can feel that he’s red-faced but he can’t help smiling.

The restaurant is a little nicer than the places they’ve been going as a party of six. It’s very trendy, all reclaimed wood and mason jars made into light fixtures. There’s a big sign advertising their seasonal juice. The hostess chirps “table for two?” at them and when Ben nods she

picks up four separate menus and leads them to a tiny table. It's busy for a weekday morning. Lots of people in yoga pants, and the background noise is pretty high.

The hostess leaves them with their menus and promises that their waiter will be back with coffee momentarily. Ben leans across the table and says, "Sorry it's loud."

Bev shakes her head and picks sugar packets out of the little ramekin, counting out three and laying them down beside her place setting. "I can do loud," she says.

He wants to say, *There's a restaurant outside of Omaha I want to show you. Very quiet. I'm a regular, but I've never had the food.* Half of him is a little afraid of what she might think of the sawdust and peanut shells, but the rest of him remembers her closing her eyes in the truck and the wrinkles in her blouse. She could have hung them up in the closet; it's her room. Beverly Marsh is elegant, but she's also Bev with the slingshot.

"Makes a nice change after..." She waves a hand to indicate *Derry*, which has always been at the uncomfortable intersection of *quiet town* and *sometimes horrific screaming*.

Ben nods.

"So what's home like?"

Before Ben can answer, the waiter comes by with the pot of coffee. Ben declines and asks for just water, but he watches Bev sprinkle three sugars into her full mug. Does she always take three sugars? He has absurd visions of her eating marmalade at his kitchen table. Does she even like marmalade?

"Quiet," he admits once the waiter goes. "They say I'm a hermit."

Bev lifts her eyebrows. "Do they?"

Ben shrugs. "I haven't been around this many people since college." Sleeping in a room together, one extended slumber party, his hand reaching out for Bev's in the dark. College was never that good. High school was never that good, either. "And I keep weird hours, for

meetings. When Mike called me, I was talking to a board meeting and I was in pajama pants.”

Bev grins. “I went to the ER in my pajamas yesterday.”

“I was wondering about that, but I figured you knew what you were doing.”

Bev shakes her head slowly. “I’m allowed to say this, because I’m a fashion designer, but fashion is completely made up. You can do basically whatever you want.”

“Well thank God,” Ben says.

“I think your cowboy boots are cute, though,” she says. “A little New Kids on the Block, a little bit country.”

The waiter comes back with a glass vase full of water. Ben thanks him and pours it into his glass.

“You’ve discovered my secret,” he tells her seriously. Then he shakes his head. “No, it’s—I really leaned into the Prairie style, it’s a little old-fashioned, it’s a little bit country.”

“Prairie style,” Bev repeats, her eyebrows lifted with interest.

“The, uh, the Chicago Group—you know how the whole Midwest is —” He stretches out his hands.

“A terrifying void of blue sky into which we might be picked up at any moment?”

Ben tilts his head back, grinning. Maine does things to people, even forgetting everything that Maine has done to them specifically. “Out of the blue and into the black,” he says, though he’s not sure where it came from. Maybe an old song. Older than New Kids.

Bev is smiling too.

“So it’s supposed to be the quintessential North American style, and to do that it kind of mimics the Midwestern landscape—all flat lines, the craftsman—uh, you know about the Arts and Crafts Movement?”

“Oh, *that* old-fashioned,” she says, grinning. She went to school for this too.

Ben’s head is full of Voysey wallpaper and Ashbee wirework. Bev with the postcard in her hand, long leaves off the trees in the Barrens behind her. They called it bamboo, back then, didn’t they? And the sunlight all green, making you see things in the water.

He made the lights for the Bohemian Girl house, when he talked his mother into coming to Nebraska for treatment. He built the whole house so she’d be able to wheel out to the back patio and sit and look at the trees below the crown of the hill, and so that when the sun went down the place would glow for her. He built it round, like the face of that watch she’d gotten him when Dorsey Corcoran went missing, when the curfew was put in place. She, a working single mother, told him that if he wasn’t home at dinner time she wouldn’t wait for him, she wouldn’t listen to his excuses, she would just call the police. And Ben built her a clockface house.

Bev, though. Bev he still sees in red and white, and the stark black of the clothes she wore to kill Pennywise, with her knees shining through white. For Bev, he’d build something different. If she let him.

Ben orders a granola bowl because he’s been eating like a trash compactor the entire time he’s been here. When the waiter comes back for a second time Bev visibly startles, like she hasn’t been thinking about anything except the conversation, which makes Ben feel like sunlight’s soaking into his bones, and then she rapidly picks up the specials menu. He watches her bite down on her lower lip, and heat burns through him. She glances up at him.

“Whatever you want,” he says, and means it. “It’s a date.”

There’s a little flush on her face, just because it’s early morning and they’ve been kissing and laughing. She orders the short rib eggs benedict, and when she cuts into it and takes a bite she drops her fork and knife.

“Oh my god,” she says, her voice low and amazed.

Ben is stirring his yogurt into his granola. “That good?”

"That good—here, try a bite." She cuts out another piece and holds her own fork across the table for him, her hand cupped under it in case of escaping hollandaise.

He inclines his head and accepts the food, butter and cheese and salt and vinegar and beef just dissolving on his tongue. He widens his eyes at her, chews, and swallows.

"That's really good," he says.

"Isn't it?"

"That's really good."

"We can split it, if you want."

He shakes his head; he's not gonna take food out of her mouth. "No, that's okay."

"Are you sure?"

He shakes his head again. "I'm good, I'm good."

"Okay." She starts cutting another bite. "How's your granola?"

Not like that. "It's good," Ben says.

She finishes the whole ciabatta and half of her potatoes. Ben takes the bill up to the hostess with a low-burning pride and the resigned awareness that he's turning into his mother.

Before Bill leaves, Beverly tries.

It has to be all six of them, she's sure. It would be better if it could be all seven again, and she doesn't know if seeing Stanley is just wish-fulfillment or if this hotel is haunted or if it's a trick from It at long last, but Bill's about to go, and Bev's convinced that when he does, the magic will go with him. They can all stay together, in this room, but they'll be weaker. They're stronger when they're together.

She told Stanley *I'm sorry* and *I can't*, but she's starting to think that this will be the last time.

Part of her wants to ask Ben to stay with her, but she's going to cry whether or not this works, and she doesn't want him to think of her like that. She wants him to have this morning, the making out in the hallway like teenagers and then talking about art over breakfast. She doesn't want to go back to weeping and making him hold her up. He'd do it, no questions asked, but she doesn't want him to right now.

Instead she has the room to herself. She keeps worrying the pack of cigarettes in her pocket, but she hasn't opened it up and taken one out. She closes her eyes and says, "Okay, okay, I'm doing this," and then she gets up and turns the mirror to face the bed.

It's just her.

"Stanley?" she asks, and closes her eyes.

When she opens them again, it's still just her.

"Stanley," she says. "If you're there—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I just..."

She turns the mirror, angling it up and then down, searching and then she catches on an edge of dark green. She doesn't dare turn around, just drags the wooden frame so that an arm slowly comes into view, and then a shoulder, and then he's there. He's staring at her in the reflection, his eyes wide, one hand holding a pair of glasses.

Bev centers him in the frame and then lets the mirror go. She puts her hand over her mouth.

"Stanley?" she asks.

Stan stares back at her, eyes almost bulging, and he nods frantically. His mouth opens and he speaks, but she hears nothing.

"I see you—I see you, honey."

Stan hooks his glasses on his cardigan and holds up both hands, his

expression apologetic.

"It's okay," she tells him. "It's okay, I see you. I'm not scared. It's okay."

Stanley covers his mouth with both hands and turns slowly in place, his head tilting back toward the ceiling. Then he stops and raises both hands again, inclines his head slightly, and takes a hesitant step in her direction.

Bev nods. "Yeah. It's okay."

He moves slowly, coming up behind her. Bev keeps her eyes on his, afraid that if she looks away, afraid that if she blinks he'll either vanish or turn into something horrible. When she has to blink she tries to do it quickly, and Stan keeps his hands over his head so she can see his exposed palms.

There's no blood on him. He looks as buttoned up as he did bent over that puzzle, when she saw him crouch to get that last piece of the floor and fit it into its spot. That was what Stan did, he assembled, he made all of them swear, he went around the circle with the shard of the coke bottle, and Bev can't believe she didn't remember him. She saw him, interspersed with him as a child, his curls all sandy, and she still didn't remember. And she saw him looking Bill in the eye, saw the shard of bottle scrape through his palm and the blood well up, and she didn't remember. She can't believe she didn't remember.

Stan pauses with his hands over her shoulder, his expression hesitant. He's starting to wobble, and Bev has to blink to clear the tears from her eyes so she can keep watching him. She realizes that Stan's tearing up too. Bev is going to be the last person to see him. She was the last person to see him before she remembered who he was, and now she's going to be the last person to see him.

She nods.

Stan lays his palm on her shoulder. Bev sees it in the mirror but there's no sensation in her skin, no warmth of hand or chill of air.

"I can't feel it," she tells him. "It's okay, though."

Stan is crying. He stoops and wraps his other arm around her shoulder and lays his head alongside hers, and he doesn't lower his face from the mirror, like he needs to see her holding him too. The mirror does something odd where their hair overlaps, fuzzing out into red.

Bev positions her hand over his forearm, where his delicate wrist bones are exposed over the cuff of his green cardigan. She curves her hand and feels nothing, but in the mirror it's the illusion of holding on.

They lean their heads against each other and cry, and eventually Stanley mouths something that Bev recognizes clearly as *I'm sorry*.

"I know," she says. "I know, honey. I'm sorry too."

He mouths something again there and then turns his face away, into her hair.

"I can't hear you," she says again. "I didn't get that, I'm sorry."

Stan shakes his head.

In the mirror, a tear rolls down his face and drips onto her jacket. Bev glances to the side automatically and then curses herself, looking back to the mirror, but Stanley is gone.

There's no spot on her jacket, either.

"No, no, no!" Bev says, getting up and twisting the mirror again. "I didn't mean to, hang on—"

This time when he appears it's across the room. He's wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand, and he looks almost startled when she finds him again.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'll be more careful."

He shakes his head and waves his free hand.

"Bill's leaving tonight," she says. "I don't know if there's any more time, but I wanted to try—I'm sorry, I was—"

Stan shakes his head again and then raises his hand to the side of his head. He extends his thumb and his pinkie finger and holds them to his ear. This gesture Bev recognizes, but Stan mouths, *Call*.

“Call?” Bev repeats. “Call who? Call Bill?”

Stan shakes his head and shakes his hand back and forth. *Call*.

“Call your wife?” Bev asks.

Stan blinks in and out of existence for a moment. Bev has a sick moment where she thinks she’s lost him, but then Stan’s no longer making the phone gesture; his hand’s over his heart, like he’s been shot.

And then a shadow darkens on the wrists of his cardigan.

“No,” Bev says. “No, honey, I’m sorry—I’ll call her. If you want me to tell her something.”

The color is draining out of Stan’s face. He shakes his head rapidly, his eyes wide and dark.

“I’ll tell her anything you want, honey, I’ll make her listen, just tell me, Stan, please.”

He shakes his head again and then lifts his right hand. This gesture Bev doesn’t recognize. His last two fingers are tucked into his palm, his first two fingers extended. It looks a bit like he’s giving her a peace sign.

“Don’t go,” she says. “Honey, please don’t go.”

But the shadow is spreading down the fabric of his sleeves, and Stan’s lips are going blue with what Bev dimly recognizes as shock.

“It’s okay,” Bev says. “It’s okay.” She steels herself. “If you need to go, Stan. That’s okay. I love you. We all love you. And it wasn’t your fault.”

Stan’s eyes are wide and he shakes his head.

"It wasn't your fault," she says. "I love you, I remember you, it wasn't your fault."

He's not just shaking his head, he's trembling.

"I love you," Bev says. "I see you. I remember you."

Stan covers his face with his hands, and then he's gone.

Bev goes downstairs and into the bar.

"Are you okay?" Bill asks.

Ben stands up. "Did—?"

She shakes her head and sits down on his lap in the only surviving fancy chair. She doesn't want to talk about it.

Eddie is perched on a barstool, holding a glass of whiskey. Apparently, since Bill offered to pay off the bar tab when he goes, they're taking advantage of the situation.

"Do you want a drink?" Bill asks.

She nods.

Bill pours her two fingers of whiskey and crosses the room to put the glass in her hand.

She takes a sip and lets the burn spread around and under her tongue. She's cold, she realizes now. She leans back into Ben and lets him wrap his arms around her and lets his heat soak into her spine.

"Where are Mike and Richie?"

"Skypeing their lawyer," Ben replies. "Out on the porch."

"On the porch?" She twists like she'll be able to see them, but the sun is going down. "They can have the room, I'm done with it."

Ben shakes his head. "They've got my laptop, they're fine."

She drinks again. There's something cleansing about the whiskey,

after seeing that blood and the way it seeped into Stan's cardigan. She couldn't get it out of that white blouse she wore, and she doesn't remember at what point she lost that black jacket. But the alcohol feels sterilizing.

"Does anyone know what this means?" She makes Stan's hand gesture, thumb positioned carefully between her two fingers. Her ring finger folds a little bit over her pinkie, slightly asymmetrical. Her nails are growing out ragged from biting into them; if she's going to appear in court she'll have to paint them, which means buying nail polish.

She threw her nail polish at Tom. It was sitting on her vanity. And then she flipped the whole vanity.

She turns the hand signal first toward Ben, who shakes his head, and then across the bar and toward Bill and Eddie.

"Peace?" Bill asks. "Like, I'm leaving?"

"Or the letter K?" Eddie offers.

She frowns at him and he switches his glass to his left hand, then mirrors the gesture with his right.

"It's sign language," Eddie says. "You know, like A, B, C—" He starts rapidly finger-spelling through the alphabet and stops on K, then turns around and shows Bill. "Like that?"

Bill shrugs.

Eddie turns back around and holds his hand out to her. "Like that?"

"Do you know sign language?" Ben asks.

Eddie shrugs, shifting his shoulders a little uncomfortably. "I know, like, words. If you can't talk, you should be able to—" He gestures again.

"Why can't you talk?" Bill asks.

Eddie hunches his shoulders. "Mumps."

“Have you had the mumps?”

“No, but I went to this restaurant and I was exposed, and like a day later they shut it down for a mumps outbreak. That’s what happens when you don’t vaccinate your fucking kids, you get mumps outbreaks, because no one gets their goddamn measles, mumps, and rubella shot, and then if you don’t get your tetanus shot you have to get a diphtheria booster at the same time, and maybe pertussis, and let me tell you, getting a tetanus shot hurts almost as much as getting stabbed in the face.”

“Almost,” Ben repeats.

“Yeah, I’m a fucking authority on the subject.” He glowers into his drink.

Bev stares down into her whiskey, watching the light reflect on its surface. There are no mysterious figures in it, just the shadow of the light fixture.

“What was Stanley’s wife’s name?” she asks.

“Oh, um.” Bill puts a hand to his mouth and thinks. “Patricia, I think. Patty.”

So not a name with a K, then. *Call K.*

Call K.

Call Kay? Kay McCall? Bev thinks, incredulous, but what would Stanley know about Kay? Then again, why *wouldn’t* Stanley know about Kay? Bev doesn’t understand the rules of the afterlife, or whatever impression of Stanley is left on the world. Suppose that all knowledge is available to him, suddenly?

Bev should call her, come to think of it. Tell her that she left Tom and ran. Kay would be nothing but supportive; Kay might even be able to tell her how to get ahold of some of her own money. Kay was one of the first numbers she memorized when she got to Chicago, back in like 2005. She doesn’t even need her contacts list from her old phone.

She leans back and drains her glass, then touches Ben on the

shoulder. “I’m gonna go make a phone call.”

“Everything okay?” he asks.

She nods. “Yeah, just gonna make a call.” She gets up and takes her phone into the hallway, then sits down on the empty check-out desk and types in Kay’s number. She holds it to her ear.

It rings for a long time. Then, just before Bev expects it to click over into voicemail, the line picks up. There’s a crackling sound.

Then Kay’s voice says, “You should know I’m recording this.”

“Kay?” Bev asks, surprised.

There is silence.

Then Kay says, “Bev? Beverly?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Oh my god,” Kay says. Her voice is low as ever, but there’s a rawness to it that’s new. “Oh my god, Bev, I thought he killed you. I thought he found you and he killed you.”

“No, no—I left.”

“I know you left,” Kay says, and then she starts laughing. “I know you left his ass, Beverly-girl, because he came to me looking for you. Thank god, thank god—are you safe?”

An icepick of fear goes through her. “He went—”

“Are you safe? Don’t tell me where you are, but are you safe?”

“Yes,” Bev says. “Yes, I’m safe, what did he do? Kay? Are you okay?”

Kay laughs, long and low, and then she says, “I got him for you, Bev. I got that fucker for you, because you didn’t tell me you were running, I got him, he’s done, you can file papers now, I got him, he came to me looking for you, and he beat me to *shit*—” There’s venom in her voice, but there’s triumph too. “—he beat me all to *shit*, but I

didn't give you up, I didn't give you up, he doesn't know where the fuck you are, I got him, Bev, I got him."

"Kay," Bev says. There's no air in the hotel. "Kay, what happened? He hurt you? Kay?"

"I don't care," Kay says. "I don't even care if you knew he would go for me. I'm suing the fuck out of him and you can drop him now too, he's a bad dog and no one will think twice now they know he's a man who beats women, I got him, I got him and I didn't give you up—"

"Kay. Kay!"

But Kay is laughing now, and Bev doesn't even know if Kay can hear her. She just keeps laughing and, on a frankly majestic cackle says, "You better stay gone, girl. You better stay wherever you are, because a man like that means to kill you, you better stay *nowhere* and don't tell me where you've gone."

"Kay, what did he do. *What did he do? Kay!*"

Ben is in the hallway and dropping to his knees in front of her where she's crouched on the desk, and Bill and Eddie are leaning out of the doorway to the bar, and Mike opens the screen door with Richie right behind him.

Bev says, "Kay? Kay?" Ben touches her knee and looks up into her face, and Kay keeps laughing, and then Eddie's guiding the phone out of her hands and pressing it to his ear.

"Hi, this is Eddie Kaspbrak, who is this?" Eddie's face goes pale, and then he lowers the phone and looks down at it. Then he glances back up at Bev. "She hung up," he says.

Bev covers her face with both hands.

4. Out of Hand

Summary for the Chapter:

Bev commits some light property damage. Ben just commits.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is intense! Please be aware of the content warnings in this chapter, and remember that I have chosen not to use them in the tags of this work. Be safe!

Content warnings: canonical violence (Tom Rogan); Ben is not over the dark or the suffocation; discussion of suicide (Stan); discussion of domestic abuse and physical violence; mention of marital rape; internalized victim-blaming (Bev); mention of sexual harassment; explicit sexual content, explicit sexual conSent; Ben is self-conscious.

Ben's first priority is Bev.

(This is not a surprise to you, so we'll move on.)

After Eddie takes the phone out of her hands, she goes frozen in a way that scares the hell out of Ben (it looks like the deadlights). He hears the front door swinging shut behind Mike and Richie, and he knows that the rest of them are coming into the hallway, but he can't look at them. He just has to hope all of them know enough to stay the hell back and give her her space.

He's at a level with her knees, not taking up her field of view at all, he's supplicant. If she takes her hands away from her eyes she'll see him, but he doesn't touch, he doesn't press, he is terrified.

She doesn't move for so long that Bill says quietly, "Beverly?"

Slowly she draws her knees up to her chest.

Okay, that's something. That's putting up a wall, that's something Ben can work with. He gets up and takes a few steps back, ushering Eddie back with him toward the bar. Eddie glances up at him but lets Ben drag him.

"What happened?" Richie asks. "Do I have to take Haystack out into the parking lot and..." He sticks his hands in his pockets. Ben goes through the five stages of grief that are old hat for people interacting with Richie. "...let him Scorpion's Fatality me? I don't know where I thought I was going with that." Mike elbows Richie and Richie hisses.

Bev's shoulders jerk once, sharply. It looks like a sob and Ben's heart sinks, but then she lowers her hands and she's smiling broadly. Laughing.

"What's a scorpion's fatality?" she asks, her voice thready.

Ben changes his mind; he loves Richie Tozier again.

"It's a, uh, video game thing, it's... too young for me, like, have you ever eaten a cocktail shrimp?"

Bev leans back on the checkout counter, both hands over her mouth. "Jesus Christ, Richie," she says.

"Yeah, it's uh, that but with a human spine."

Bev breaks into silent laughter again, and then she's twisting around on the desk and swinging her legs over the other side. "I'll just—I'm fine, I'll just—" She opens the door marked *Staff Only* and goes through, leaving it open behind her. Ben sees her vanish down the hall.

There's a sick reel in his gut, an *I'm never going to see her again, a Please don't go, girl.*

"I got her," he says, turning back to the guys clustered in the hallway.

"Phone," Eddie says, and puts it in Ben's hand.

"Yeah you do," Mike says, and grabs Richie by the arm. "Come on. We gotta call Deaver back before he drops us."

"Now I really want some goddamn shrimp," Richie mutters as they go out to the porch again.

As the door swings shut behind them, Ben hears Mike ask, "Why?"

Bill and Eddie are watching him. Ben—knows that it's wrong to let Bev walk away, knows that whatever just happened was bad and she shouldn't be alone, but pursuing her—hunting her through the Townhouse—feels just as much the wrong move. He stares at Bill, lost.

Bill nods once.

Hating himself, Ben closes his eyes and follows Bev down the hallway. He closes the door behind them as he goes.

It's dark. This shouldn't surprise him, but it does. He can feel the walls on either side of him, how narrow the passage is. It's not at all a wide-open cavern. He can hear his boots on the hardwood, too, and that's a completely different sound, a clean and dry and slightly squeaky sound, but his palms start sweating anyway.

He listens for Bev, hears the distant tap of her footsteps.

"Bev?" he calls after her. "Are you okay?"

He almost doesn't expect her to respond, but her footsteps go silent. Then she says, her voice louder than he expected, "Yeah. I'm—I'm okay."

He finds her abruptly in the dark, little concentrated shadow beside the inlaid well of a door. He almost trips on her, actually, and then he backs the hell up and puts his hands out, palms extended to her even if she can't see them.

"I don't know what just happened," he says. "And you don't have to tell me. But—" *I need to know you're okay and you don't seem like you should be alone and just let me be in the room with you when you do whatever you're going to do all feel wrong.* He's fumbling his way in the dark. Every step counts.

"No, no, it's—" She draws in a thin breath and then grabs his hand.

He startles, but she doesn't let go. "What do you think's behind this door?"

"I—I'd guess kitchen?" Ben offers, if this used to be a townhouse.

There's the click of a lever turning and then the door swings open. The vastness of the room beyond spreads out behind it. Something gleams inside.

"I think you're right," Bev says. There's an electronic hum, as of a refrigerator. "Can you help me find the lights?"

Ben takes his free hand and carefully reaches through the door, feeling for the wall. He finds the light switch after a few moments of blind groping, and the room bursts into view. The light is slightly yellow, and the galley is centered around a long island countertop. Stainless steel fridge, dishwasher, oven, and industrial trio of sinks all shine at him.

Is this place supposed to offer *food*?

Bev strides into the room with utter confidence for a trespasser—and yes, they've already broken the furniture in the bar, they might as well compound their violations of this building. Ben watches her, gently closing the kitchen door behind them just in case someone (or something) comes down the long hallway after them. He doesn't know how to characterize her movements now. She was still and frightening in the lobby. He's seen her relaxed and happy, or grieving. The stiffness of her shoulders and deliberation in her step throws him.

"I want to break something," she says.

Okay.

"Okay," Ben says out loud. "Are you thinking, like, windows, or like, fine china?"

She turns to him with a tightness to her lips. Something in his gut shifts nervously, fearing her disapproval.

"You're not gonna try to talk me out of it?"

"I didn't say that," he says. "We joked about driving the truck through the Townhouse, but as long as you're not going after anything load-bearing..." He shrugs.

"We're gonna get in trouble."

"I don't believe anyone actually works here," Ben says. "I'll pay for it. I'll tell them I let three separate fraternities host ragers here. You do whatever you want."

Bev spins in place, her hands coming up to clutch at her hair. "You can't just—you're not—"

He doesn't know what to do. Her heels are so close together and her elbows are stretched high; he thinks of tornadoes, of firespouts.

Slowly he asks, "Do you want me to tell you not to?"

She looks away from him, the set of her jaw turning her mouth sharp. "I don't know."

Well, if she doesn't know, she doesn't know.

"But you want to break something," Ben says.

"Yes," she says with a fierceness that startles him.

Her phone is in his pocket, but he's not gonna offer her the only lifeline to a world outside the Townhouse to destroy. Instead he goes over to a wall and starts opening up cabinets, finding—a ha. It's a fancy tea set.

He hooks a finger through a teacup so small it could fit in his palm and holds it up for her inspection. He'd like this idea better if she were wearing protective eyewear or something, but she has on closed-toed shoes and unless Ben wants to go steal Richie's glasses this is probably the best they can do.

"Do you want to?" he asks.

She holds her hand out for the teacup. He places it in her palm. The small blue design on it reminds him of her toenail polish. Her fingers

curl around it and she turns it over.

“It’s really delicate,” she says.

He nods.

“Probably expensive.”

He picks up a second teacup, looking for a year or something on the bottom. “Probably,” he agrees; the ceramic is as thin as petals.

“And old, and probably important to someone, and we’re not supposed to be in here, we would get in trouble.”

He consciously sets an elbow down on the counter and makes himself look relaxed, not an authority figure.

Bev’s lips move, tightening at the corners of her mouth. Then she turns and whips the teacup toward the wall.

It is a beautiful throw. It soars in a straight line, whirling on an axis so that the handle turns around and around, and smashes against the far wall. The sound makes Ben think not of things shattering but, for some reason, biting into cookies—royal icing and sugar and saliva blossoming under his tongue. Things that break but are sweet when they do.

She stands there with her arm outstretched still, her fingers splayed apart as they were when she released the cup.

“Give me another,” she says.

It is an eight-piece tea set. There are seven remaining cups, with little saucers, tiny and delicate spoons, a teapot, and the teapot’s lid. There are small plates under the saucers, no doubt for sandwiches, and then there’s a sugar bowl with a lid, a tiny jar for cream, and another small bowl whose purpose is mysterious to Ben. He hands her the saucer to the cup she just destroyed.

She throws that too. This one goes end over end and smashes in almost precisely the same place the cup did.

Then she covers her mouth.

“I saw Stanley,” she says.

“Just now?” Ben asks.

She shakes her head. “Up in the room. Give me another.”

He gives her the small plate. She accepts it and then throws it in the same path; it manages not to break against the wall, but it drops to the floor with its flight interrupted and shatters there.

“I saw him, in the mirror. He cried; and he—” Her throwing arm folds up over her shoulder, gesturing, and Ben can see it—the way a man might rest his head there in the crook of her neck. “He cried, and I cried, and then I asked him if he wanted me to call his wife, and I scared him, and he started—” Her face breaks, her mouth stretching and chin turning down to hide it. “Give me another.”

He hands her another teacup. This one flies wide, spinning into the corner of the room and smashing.

Bev sets her hand down on the island, her shoulder hunched forward, bracing. There’s a painting Ben saw in school—a woman in all black, her arm twisted, and he can’t remember what it was called, but she reminds him of it now. Her hair hangs wild down in front of her face.

“He started to bleed,” Bev says. “Because I reminded him.”

“That’s not your fault,” Ben says.

She looks up at him. Her eyes are shiny with unshed tears. “I saw him,” she says, her voice surprisingly steady. “I saw him cut his wrists. I saw him bleed out. I saw him die.”

“I know,” Ben says. “I’m sorry. I wish you hadn’t.”

She holds out her hand. He spares a moment of fear for all those shards of broken pottery smashed on the other half of the room, but he gives her the saucer. She throws that without any elegance and it hits the wall and breaks in two, and then more when it hits the ground.

“He wasn’t alone,” she says. “I was there. But he didn’t know, and I didn’t know, and his wife was in the house. They were going to Buenos Aires. He had just finished a puzzle. If—” Her breath hitches and she pauses to steady herself, then plows through. “It was of birds. I wonder if they were all of birds, if that was the appeal, if he only did bird puzzles, or if he just liked puzzles.”

Ben tries to remember what he can of Stanley Uris—the order of his world, the way he inventoried and catalogued and collected. The crisp collars on his shirts, and the stripes on his clothes, and the high-waisted shorts that seemed to hold their sharp folds even when they were running around in the Barrens.

“He probably liked puzzles,” he says slowly.

Bev smiles sadly, closing her eyes. She holds out her hand.

He gives her the plate and she throws it. He watches this time to see how far the shards scatter, but they don’t make it this far down on the island.

She stands there for a moment, her arm still stretched out like some ancient Olympian with a discus. Ben thinks of statues.

Then she slowly lowers her arm.

“I hit Tom,” she says. “When I left. I hit him, I threw everything I had on my vanity table at him, and I have good aim, I always have fucking good aim, give me another.”

He says nothing and hands her a third teacup.

She throws it and this time her mouth opens slightly as she does it, her teeth baring. Not the certainty and confidence with which she had pointed an empty slingshot at a teenage werewolf all those years ago—the moment the better parts of Ben fell in love with her—but with a kind of feral snarl, like she can see someone. Not Stanley. Someone to hit.

“I told him, I hit him with—with my perfume, with my face cream, I got him in the head and stunned him and he started *pouring* blood, I told him he wanted to get out of my way, and I told him that I would

kill him. Another.”

Ben passes her the saucer.

Wham against the far wall.

“And then I pushed the vanity on him, and the mirror—it broke all over him, and I got his belt while he was climbing his way out. I said—I said—‘If you come for me, I’m going to strap the shit out of you,’ I knew I could do it and I told him, and then I *did*.” There are goosebumps on her arm. She runs her tongue over her teeth, still staring in the direction she threw instead of at him. “And I hit him in the face. Just—” Her fist clenches abruptly, a sharp jerk of motion, like she’s swinging the belt in her hand. “I had him spitting out his own teeth, and I...”

She goes still, her hands creeping up to either side of her head again. Her fists press there, the heels of her hand digging into her temples, and she’s smiling.

“I loved it,” she says.

Ben watches her.

She closes her eyes, her smile not widening but deepening somehow, in the corners of her eyelids where her lashes fold up, where grooves are starting to lay in her skin.

“I loved it. He bled everywhere—*everywhere*, got it all over the fucking place, and I loved it. I walked out without my shoes, and I took off my ring, and I just fucking laughed. That’s what I am.”

She turns, suddenly, to Ben. One hand lowers; the other holds tight to her temple and she looks at him from under her own wrist, the bruises faint but still there, all yellow and gray.

“That’s what I am,” she says. “I think I’m scared of blood, until I draw it. That’s what I—that’s what I’ve always been, I think. That’s the little girl I put back in the box, who was sleeping until Mike called—that’s what I was in this place, and I had to... I had to...”

She grins harder; her teeth are very white against the strain in her

pale lips.

Slowly Ben realizes she's asking for a response—something, some kind of judgment. Wants to be seen, in the breaking and the snarling and the declarations.

"Why'd you hit him?" he asks, though he already knows.

Bev's smile dies. He hates that he did that, but he feels he had to. There's something... glorying, in her wild look, with her hair standing up where her hands tugged at it and her sharp white teeth. She says *I loved it* and he believes her, but he doesn't believe that she loves telling him about it.

I want to break something, she said.

Well, Ben's a big guy. He can take a hit.

Slowly Bev lowers her other hand, resting it on the table.

"You know," she says, all the relish gone out of her voice.

Ben has learned a lot from her flinch when he was too close and too loud, and from the marks on her arms, and from the mention of a belt. From the way she told him that she gave her husband every chance—every chance to get out of her way and let her storm through, every chance hidden in the *if you come for me*, the if-then, the clear consequence.

"I guessed," he says, because he's not going to lie to her. "But only you know."

She laughs then, an unkind laugh, one that makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up before he realizes it's not directed at him. "Everyone knows," she says. "When they pulled me aside at the ER when Eddie was getting stitched up, the nurses tried to get me to talk about it. Everyone knows. Kay knew—she's my best friend from home, or she was, because I think I got her almost killed, she stood up for me at my wedding—it was three months after the first time he hit me. He—" She swallows. "He hit me, and then he—" Her chest rises and falls, and she looks away.

Some cold knowledge drops the words deep inside Ben. Ice sliding off a glacier, dropping into the water.

Raped her, the words go. Her husband hit her, and then he raped her.

“And I married him,” Bev says. “And I knew I couldn’t be happy—he wanted me to throw out all my fucking cigarettes, but I hid them, and that’s what—” She swallows again and a little gulp of air whistles out of her nose.

Ben’s anger is not helpful. Ben’s anger is irrelevant. There’s only Bev.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he says quietly. He might not know the right thing to say, but he can say a true thing.

Bev’s nostrils flare and a little of that wild snarl comes back into her face. “He beat the shit out of Kay, because I left. I didn’t tell him where I went and he thought maybe she did, and he beat the shit out of her—I knew he hit me, I knew what he thinks of women, I married a man who hates women, I knew what I was getting into, he called Kay a women’s lib bitch in every other breath, and I—”

Ben settles his other elbow onto the island and puts his chin in his hands, looking up at her.

“I should have killed him,” Bev says, and turns away. She’s wearing a black jacket much like the one from the Chinese restaurant, and she draws her arms in tight around herself, white hands appearing on either side of her waist.

“It’s not your fault,” he says again.

“Well then *whose fault is it, Ben?*” she shouts.

In the wake of her voice, the emptiness of the kitchen rings between them.

Then she turns back around. “I’m sorry, I...”

Ben waves a hand and straightens up. She’s angry, she’s scared, she’s lashing out. It’s not about him.

“It’s his fault,” he says easily, a man who has never struck a woman. He’s always found it pretty easy to make that choice. It’s not ever a thing he really had to think about.

Bev’s face twists up. “I knew,” she says.

He shakes his head. “You didn’t know he would go after Kay.”

“I knew what kind of man he is, I should have thought...”

“You got out,” he says. “Everything else is on him.”

“I broke his teeth. I cut him up.”

“Yeah,” Ben agrees, and thinks, *sounds like he fucking deserved it*, but does not say it. “To get out. You’re not—” He has to think about what he wants to say next, in the face of Bev’s drained look and all the shattered china. “We both know what vicious people are like, Bev. You’re not... you’re not cruel.”

“I know what vicious people are like,” Bev says even quieter. “I told you I made him bleed and I liked it.”

The way an animal in a trap likes getting free, no matter what it has to bite through.

The way a little boy on a riverbank screams at much bigger boys making lewd gestures at a girl he loves.

“I let him hurt me,” she says.

Ben closes his eyes and then hikes up his shirt, showing her the scarring.

“It took me that long to get loose,” he says. “He was going to write his whole name on me.”

But this is about her, so he drops the hem of his shirt again and crosses his arm over it, wishing he hadn’t done that.

Bev stares at him for long moments, and then she says, “Kiss me,” almost frantic. She leans over the island, but she’s small and Ben

doesn't want her hiking through all the broken pottery trying to come around to him, so he leans all the way over and puts his hips on the counter and kisses her the way he always wanted to, even before he knew what he wanted. He puts his heart on her lower lip and thinks of icing sugar.

Later when she's gone up to bed he comes back downstairs, in the dark, and finds a broom and sweeps up the mess and leaves money in the cabinet next to all of the missing china.

Bill leaves.

Bev stops bleeding, though she has more sugar pills to take. The days are blurring together in a long smear.

She goes with Mike and Richie to pick out suits (Richie claims to be banned from Freese's) and then goes into an art supply store to match bobbins of thread to their jackets. She buys pins and chalk and feels a lot like she's back in school again, trying to crank out cohesive looks for a final project and begging her friends to model for her. She considers hemming by hand and then remembers that there is joy to be had in life, and buys a tiny travel sewing machine in a bright chartreuse. It is adorable and it amuses her probably more than it should.

Then she thinks *fuck it* and buys a cheap sketchbook and pencils. The night Bill left she dreamed a little—no nightmares, just walking through some kind of hall of curtains, grabbing hold of the fabric in her hands and feeling it in her palm, releasing it and watching the way it draped. She dreamed like that, when Rogan&Marsh first went independent, building her first collection to show to the national buyers. The conviction that the right look was there, among every other one in the world, and all she had to do was find it.

She stands on a chair to put pins in Mike's jacket, checking the fit across his shoulders and marking how far she'll have to take the sides in. Mike just looks very concerned, as though he's afraid she'll fall off the chair and it will be his fault somehow. Richie leans on the bar and makes gratuitous inseam jokes.

"My needles—your balls," Bev replies, pins in the corner of her mouth.

Richie covers himself. "Yowza!"

Ben is there, and she's already told him about cracking Tom where it hurt, but his expression changes not at all.

Eddie says, "Can you cool it with the sexual harassment for like thirty seconds, please, Richie?"

Richie comes up with a retort that Bev pays no attention to. She has Mike turn in place so she can measure from the other side and pin.

In the end it's more of Ben's money than she'd be comfortable spending otherwise, but Mike and Richie look sharp. They stand in front of the mirror at the same time, Richie trying to stretch taller on his toes and Mike just grinning.

"Well, I'm the best-dressed librarian in Maine," he tells Bev, and kisses the top of her head. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"You are more than welcome," she tells him, and then points at Richie. "And you? Are on thin ice." She smiles so he knows she's teasing.

"*I live on thin ice, Bevvie my dear,*" Richie says, faking wounded and self-aggrandizing at the same time. It's a weird effect.

He's much more subdued in court, when the formal charges are declared against him. Bev, Mike, Ben, and Eddie sit in the gallery, watching Richie with his hands behind his back, his fingers fidgeting nervously. When Richie hesitantly declares, "Not guilty, Your Honor," Eddie deflates a little bit in what seems like relief.

"I thought he was gonna say something stupid," he whispers to Bev.

"Give him time," Bev whispers back.

They go to a drive back to the Townhouse afterwards, Ben, Bev, and Eddie wedged into the bench seat of Mike's truck and Mike and Richie in the rental car. Ben's phone dings and Bev reaches for it

without thinking twice, fishing his phone out of his pocket.

It's Bill texting. *Still remember all of you. Good luck, Richie.*

"He remembers," Bev reports, and tucks the phone back into Ben's jacket.

Eddie gives a great sigh of relief.

Bev has not yet suggested that they all stop sharing a hotel room, but she knows the time is coming. Without Bill here the sense of safety in numbers is weakened. She hasn't caught glimpses of Stan out of the corner of her eye, no matter where she is. Eventually one of them will observe that they're grown men too old for sleepovers, let alone for weeks, and they'll all go to their separate rooms, and Bev will have Ben to herself.

It's not that that's a thing she doesn't want. She waits until he's not looking to check him out, waits until he's sitting casually somewhere across the room before she'll let herself imagine smearing a kiss under his jaw, feeling him gasp and turn in towards her. He's sleeping on the floor next to her and he hasn't complained once, and Bev falls asleep playing out daydreams too distant and imaginary even to keep her up at night. She goes slick but it's almost an afterthought, just consequence of imagining Ben on the bed, just something to keep her brain occupied.

She doesn't dream about sex, and thank god, considering how she usually wakes up curled around Richie, with Eddie climbing up out of the bed on the other side and Mike now camping in front of the door.

But she could have sex, if she wanted to. She's sure Ben wants to; sure he's just waiting for her to ask him for what she wants; sure that he'll never bring it up if she doesn't. But she's out of birth control pills and.

And.

She has to ask herself—does she trust that Tom never had anyone else, in their six years of marriage? Maybe in the earlier days, before the beer started filling him in? Does she trust Tom not to ruin her,

not to make her sick, not to defile her in some way she doesn't know about to pass on to Ben?

Do you trust your husband?

Well, only as far as he should trust her. Which, considering the affair she's not just contemplating, but planning for... No.

She wouldn't be brave enough to do this if they weren't all counting down the days between court hearings and statements and testimonies, but she asks Ben for a card and then she takes Mike's truck to an urgent care facility and has a blood screen done. They ask her where she'd like the results delivered, and Bev closes her eyes and curses, then rapidly texts Ben.

Ben gives her an address in Nebraska.

She asks for the paper copy there and then if there's any way to email her results if they come in faster. The nurse, with no judgment on her face, nods and gives her a pamphlet on building a profile on the clinic's website. There's a mailing list. Bev will have to borrow Ben's computer for that, too, but there's still time.

She pays the copay and then goes to the drugstore and buys condoms and water-based lubricant because she's forty-one and sometimes she needs it, and then she gets back in the truck with her purchases and lets her head rest on the dashboard for a few moments. Then she tells herself that she's too old to be so terrified of what she wants, and she starts the truck and drives back to the Townhouse. The bag goes into her suitcase next to the bag of pads and tampons.

Ben looks politely curious when she returns to give him his card. "Everything okay?" he asks.

She nods. In her hand is her sketchbook, which at the moment contains nothing more than the abstract sketches of dress forms she laid out the other day when bored. "Just running an errand."

He nods. At some point he acquired a container of toothpicks, and he's using that and a thawed bag of frozen peas to build little structures. Bev finds this extremely interesting to watch—the other

day he used a bit of thread left over from Mike's suit alteration to tie a fan of them together and create some kind of roof out of the small skewers. Richie calls it *grown up Tinkertoys*.

"What do you need for a proper workspace?" Ben asks idly.

He understands—the way that the need to create something builds up in her, the way that her brain returns to it during any little moment of discomfort. She dreamed of scarves last night, just rows and rows of scarves at a bazaar, and unrolling them from wooden poles and passing their soft fabric over her lips.

Bev doesn't think of her studio, or her house in Chicago. Instead her brain throws out a sewing machine that folds into a table, one of the old-fashioned ones, completely unnecessary but decadent in its old beauty.

And she knows Ben has designs of his own.

Something breaks the night Eddie says *I have to go back* at dinner.

Richie says "I gotta show you something" and they take Richie's car, and Mike drives Ben and Bev back to the Townhouse in Mike's truck, Ben in the passenger seat and Bev perched between them on the bench seat in a sacrifice to Ben's longer legs. She drapes her right leg over Ben's left knee and he accepts it, casual intimacy like laced fingers.

"So do you think they're gonna kill each other?" Mike asks into the silence.

Bev sighs a little through her nose. Ben thinks of how blank Richie looked in the restaurant, after Eddie said he was leaving, how his face betrayed not a single thought.

"I am genuinely scared to know what's gonna happen," he says.

"Amen," says Mike.

But Richie and Eddie come back from wherever they went,

unmurdered and no more or less rumpled than when they left the restaurant. By that point Mike has discovered a character in Bill's latest novel who is transparently based on Stan, and keeps reading aloud choice lines to the rest of them in the bar. It could be painful, but it isn't. Bev has her sketchbook on her knees and is twisted sideways in the chair; Ben is thinking about how to turn his hexagonal lights into heptagons and how to make them all fit together without the negative space. Richie and Eddie slot into their usual places at the bar and they sit around and talk and hang out, like the clubhouse.

(—*dirt pouring down around him*—)

But in the same way he knew Bev was making the right call when she said they should all share a room, after the quarry; he knows Richie's gonna say something and it's gonna be the right thing too.

"So is anyone else completely fucked up from sleeping in a weirdly platonic orgy for the last—I don't know how long?"

For a certain value of *the right thing* anyway.

"The hell kind of orgies are you going to in L.A.?" Mike asks.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He turns and looks at Ben. "Look, I know you went on some kind of vision quest that imparted the beauty of iceberg lettuce into your life—"

Thank you, Richie.

"You have actually been on a vision quest," says Mike.

Richie waves that away. "—but if you'd like to sleep on a mattress tonight, you are more than welcome to it. Or, like, the three of you are welcome to fight it out for my spot. I'm going back to my room."

Interesting, Ben thinks. Of all of them, still hanging on even after Bill left, Richie ends the arrangement.

To Bev, Richie's saying, "Forgive me for abandoning you, love of my life, fire of my—"

“Beep,” Ben interrupts before they all have to listen to Richie say *loins*.

Richie bows over Bev’s chair and kisses her hands, which makes her laugh.

“Uh, not that I don’t appreciate you guys’ boundless generosity, but I literally don’t have a bed. My bed’s part of a crime scene,” says Mike. Which is why, when Ben realized Mike was never going to awkwardly excuse himself from the room, Ben went out and bought him a three-season sleeping bag.

This never occurred to Richie, because he says, “Oh shit, Mike doesn’t have a bed!”

“Yeah, and, uh, my room was released by CSI and I don’t think they’ve been charging me for it. At least, no additional charges have appeared on my card,” says Eddie.

“And Eddie’s a squatter who stole the bedding.” Richie keeps talking as Ben zones out for a moment, counting up the number of beds and the number of bodies and coming up with—

Bev turns her head toward him from across the bar. “Well, are you sleeping in your room?”

Oh jesus. If she wants him to go, he’ll go, she’s earned her privacy by now. And while Ben is aware that at his age his back ought to be hurting him more from sleeping on the floor for so many nights, he wakes up feeling great. He had kind of chalked it up to half-optimism, half the response that people get when they go on spiritual retreats to monasteries and sleep on hardwood. Spine realigned by sudden new understanding of the world. But. He could lie next to her in the dark, while she was falling asleep. He could press his lips to the top of her spine and smell her hair.

“Am I sleeping in my room?” he asks, blinking away the wave of *want*.

Bev smirks and says to the room at large, “Well, since Richie’s trying to volunteer the other half of my bed out, I’m gonna go ahead and

volunteer Ben's room.”

Because her bed is taken. Ben's heart thumps.

Richie is, as ever, Richie: “Hey, Ben, I've been carrying an old condom in my wallet for twenty-seven years.”

Ben rolls his eyes and then gives Richie a cool look. “Oh, good, do you mind if I burn it in a ritual to kill a demon?”

This pleases the court jester: “Oh! Haystack Calhoun, everybody.”

Ben actually always liked that nickname, growing up. He'd never had a nickname before—had never been that type of boy—but when Richie bestowed it upon him... Well, it was because Haystack Calhoun was fat, but Haystack Calhoun was cool.

In this moment, Ben feels distinctly uncool.

“That'll release demons, not kill them,” Mike says.

“Well, Mike's the expert. Mike, if you get scared of escaped mental patients and need a scrawny white comedian to protect you, or if you just wanna come up and spoon—”

Mike snorts and Ben almost does too, as if anyone's going to be crawling into bed with Richie but Eddie. Apparently Richie can't help himself either, turning his head a little bit to catch Eddie's glare.

Ben feels a little cooler now, in comparison. He makes eye contact with Bev, who either has an excellent poker face or has better things to think about. Which, actually, Ben does too, he's just trying not to think them in a room with all his beloved idiot friends.

“I'll keep that in mind. I'm up late, so if a black man climbs into your bed at three in the morning, try not to piss yourself, all right?”

“For you? Anything. Eddie, if you wanna go out and whisper sweet nothings into the backseat of my rental car? It's leather. So, like, clean up with your Baby Wipes afterwards, I know you have them.” He leaves with the last parting shot: “Make good choices!”

Bev just smiles, watching him go. “I love that man,” she says, “and one day I’m gonna kick his ass.”

She says it easily, no trace of the agonized conversation in the galley kitchen the other night.

Mike laughs.

Eddie sighs. “Yeah, he’s earned it.” Then he pours himself a glass of straight gin.

Ben doesn’t have anything better to do, but he suspects that drinking is not the right move here. Mike seems to have reabsorbed into his book, and Bev has lowered her head to her sketchbook again. Ben has never been great at carrying the weight of the conversation. He stares absently at Beverly’s crown of red hair, falling forward over her face in her concentration, and wipes out everything else in his mind. He draws shapes behind her, pale finished backgrounds.

Bev was always so *bright*. Even in summer, in Derry, in the Barrens, under the blue sky and the green and gold light. Everything else seemed bleached and pale in comparison to her. She walked away and Ben found himself standing as though in the middle of that snowstorm, in his new snowpants, the wind scraping his cheeks. Maybe it’s just affection for the only poem he ever wrote in his life—even as a teenager he vaguely remembers tearing up scraps and throwing them in the garbage—but he’d like to see her like that, he thinks. Surrounded by whiteness, burning flame at the heart of... wherever she goes.

But Bev is bright, despite the black-and-white wardrobe she wears as an adult. Maybe Ben should be trying to give her that color, silk panels and emerald greens for her eyes—though he was sure they used to be blue—and sunshine pouring through the windows.

Eventually Eddie says slowly, “I’d better go up and get my stuff.”

“Okay,” Bev says. Ben’s relieved she responds so that he doesn’t have to.

There are a lot of places he could show Bev. Nebraska’s only one of

them—and the dearest to his heart, of course. But there's the place outside Manchester with the bird wallpaper—but maybe that would just remind them both of Stan, now—or the place in Hong Kong with the sharply modern black tabletops, love letters to calligraphy. Bev will have fashion weeks to go to, right? That will necessitate travel.

Part of Ben wants to pull up the Rogan&Marsh website so that he can look through her old collections, trying to get a sense of the things she always returns to. But after what she said about her husband—he doesn't think he'll ever look at something she hasn't shown him. If she turns to him and says *This is my work*, he'll look to love, but that man is a poisoned well. Ben only wants to see Beverly.

Eddie goes upstairs and they hear him dragging his suitcases in the hall. Bev lifts her eyes toward the ceiling, definitely listening, and then lowers her gaze again. Ben can't quite make out what she's sketching, but he sees vicious pleats. Then she stands.

"I'll see you later, then," she says calmly, and kisses Ben on the cheek before she goes up. Ben listens to her footsteps too, unhurried, casual.

The silence in the bar is painful, if only because Mike won't look up.

Ben stews for a little bit and then he says, "So I'm going to—"

Mike lowers his e-reader. "Man, I know where you're going, get out of here."

Ben gets up. "Thank you, Mike."

"I'm taking your room."

"Yessir."

When he comes up Bev is taking a shower for what he's pretty sure is the second time that day. He can hear the water running in the bathroom as soon as he opens the door to the room, and he gingerly closes it behind him. The room looks curiously empty without everyone else's luggage—though all that means is it looks like a normal hotel room shared by two people.

Ben is briefly paralyzed by the idea that he has to decide where to

wait for her, and that when she comes out of the bathroom even the way he looks is going to say something he has very little control over. He sits on the end of the bed, then feels stupid, gets up, sits in the desk, feels stupider, and takes off his boots. He sits on the left side of the bed and puts his feet up. Then he remembers his socks, rapidly strips them off, and throws them into the corner with his boots.

The water turns off. He hears the curtain rings sliding as she steps out of the shower.

Relax, he tells himself, drags the pillow up to the headboard, and leans on it.

After a few moments, Bev opens the door and suddenly nothing else matters.

She's wearing one of the thin hotel towels, and her hair is wetted down like it was in the quarry, dark red. She pauses with her hand on the doorknob and leans out slightly, looking at him. There's a flush in her face from the hot water.

Red and white. Bev is always red and white.

He does not move. He looks at her—her face and her neck where her hair lies against it and the line of her collarbone. He thinks dimly that her skin is creamy, but that that's not right, exactly, because there's a kind of translucent quality to her. She seems less substantial in this moment than any other woman he's seen. Like a dream, like she might close the door and vanish and he might wake up on the floor to see her hand reaching out for him in her sleep.

She gives a soft smile. "Hi," she says.

"Hi." His voice is a lot lower than he intended; the surprise gravel almost startles him. He needs to be careful, needs to make sure that she knows she's in control, that he has no expectations, that if she wanted to put on her pajamas and go to sleep he'd be happy just to lie beside her. He can't say any of that. Nothing else is coming out of his mouth.

She comes across the room; the polish on her toes has chipped into

sharp angles. Holding her towel in place, she sits on the end of the bed. The sheets are wrecked and tangled and the duvet is still on the floor; Ben abruptly feels as though he's failed her in some way, but then considers the likelihood of being able to find rose petals and candles at this short notice and the fact that she'd probably laugh if he had them. Red and white. Her knees fold to the side, hand holding the towel shut over her left breast. She looks soft.

"So I should tell you," she says quietly, and he yanks his gaze back up to her eyes. Her little smile has faded somewhat and her eyes are serious; he lifts his chin slightly to show he's listening. "I had a blood test. But I haven't gotten the results yet."

Ben's brain skips over all of the completely logical and relevant things a blood test would be for and goes straight to *pregnancy?* before he realizes she's talking about STI screenings. His gaze drops to her elbow; there's a blotchy red bruise there, where she had the draw. He should have noticed that before.

"Oh," he says quietly. "I—haven't been screened either. Do you want to wait, until...?"

She shakes her head and Ben feels a prickle at his cheeks and jaw—*she doesn't want to wait*—as he blushes. Anything she wants. Literally anything.

"And I..." Her lips flatten for a moment and she looks down at her own knees. "I have some scarring. Just." Her fingers clench on the towel.

There is no place for Ben's anger in this bed. She said *I have scarring* not *someone hurt me*, and Ben has scarring too. He doesn't want to think about everything that happened. Just her, and how her face is almost clear of freckles at the moment but her shoulders and arms are still spattered with them, and how her wet hair makes him think of mermaids.

"Okay," he says. "Do you—should I not—" He swallows; he can't fuck this up already. "I want to do literally anything you want," he manages. It's too sincere; his voice sounds like it comes straight out of his bones. "Anything in the whole world. I want you to feel good, I

don't want you to think about anything else, I just want you to be here and be happy you're here."

She smiles then, corner of her mouth drawing up and her eyes crinkling. He's so in love with her.

"I'm happy I'm here," Bev says, and then she slides off the bed. She goes over to her suitcase and stoops slightly to open it. Ben's eyes follow the curve of her spine to the small of her back, the way the towel hangs crookedly around her thighs. There's a rustle of plastic and then she stands up and holds up a box of condoms. She's been thinking about this, it's not a spur of the moment choice, she's been thinking about him and wanting him and...

"Lights on or off?" she asks.

If the lights are on, she'll look at him and be able to see him. But he'll be able to see her too, and god, he wants that.

"On," he says. "If that's what you want."

"That's what I want," she says, and climbs up onto the bed on her knees. She tosses the condoms to the side and comes over to him; Ben realizes what she means to do in a second and sits up, pressing his legs together and reaching out to take her by the hips as she climbs over him. He's still fully dressed and she's in a towel, and he doesn't quite like the idea of his jeans rough against her skin, but then she's leaning down and they're kissing.

God, Bev.

He puts a hand around the back of her neck and feels the weight of her wet hair there, brushing it aside. She smells like shampoo, she tastes like nothing so much as *warmth*, and she sighs a little bit when he slides his tongue against hers. Good. He wants her relaxed; he wants her to dissolve on this bed, over him.

"You're beautiful," he says and means it even though his eyes are shut; beauty on a macro scale, outside the eyes, beauty in the way she's laying down on him with the towel and her wet hair dripping cold onto his shirt and her legs sliding over his and against the

sheets.

“You’re overdressed,” she says into his mouth, and her hands are sliding up his sides. Ben pulls his hand off the small of her back—press of her spine and then soft rise of her ass under the rough towel—and starts rapidly undoing buttons, keeping his lips to hers. He feels her smile. “How many shirts are you wearing?”

“Like three,” he replies, and she laughs. He feels it vibrate down into her belly. He loves her.

She sits up a little bit as he yanks his shirts over his head and throws it somewhere, and her towel is slipping. She holds it up with only a press of her hand, and Ben pauses, conscious of her perched over his thighs.

“Should I—?” he asks, one hand going to the button of his fly.

Bev hums a little bit and puts both hands down on his ribs. She runs her palms over him, warm and almost dry, and he feels himself arch a little bit into her before he gets control of his hips. The flap of her towel is hanging open, exposing soft rise of breast and then the dip of her sternum. Her thumbs stroke just above his waistband.

“Come up here, please,” he says, reaching for her thighs, and she lets him slide her up his body so she’s sitting on his abs and god that’s so much better, skin on skin and he can feel her hot and wet and crisp curls, he didn’t mean to accelerate things this fast.

She leans forward to kiss him and he finds the edge of the towel with his fingers, reaching up. There’s her hipbone, there’s her stomach, there’s the spot where she stops being soft and becomes smooth at the bottom of her ribcage. He reaches his thumb up and runs it along the crease under her breast. Bev sighs again through her nose and he puts his lips to her throat, just under her ear.

“Yes?” he asks.

He hears the towel slide down her back before it lands on him. Then she puts his hand on her breast.

“Come on,” she says.

He obeys. He spreads his fingers over her, he finds her nipple with his fingertips and brushes it to hear her gasp a little. “Yes?” he asks again.

“Fucking yes, Ben, touch me.” Her hips shift on him and there’s a wet *slide* that makes his thighs tense. He sits up a little bit further and tilts her backwards, following the line of her neck down to her collarbone, running nose and lips over her skin, and down toward the well between her breasts.

There’s a scar high up there. Round burn scar, cigarette-sized, just where the slope of her breast starts. It’s almost the color of her skin, no redness left to it, but the skin around it is tight and shiny. That’s where she was holding her towel up.

She also has a mole on her breast, just under her nipple. He kisses her there and then pulls away to look at it again. It’s not quite symmetrical; it’s small and darker than any of her freckles and it curls almost into a crescent-moon shape.

“I love you,” he hears himself say, and then wants to kick himself.

Bev laughs again, low and sexy. He’s gonna think about this every time he hears her laugh ever again. “I love you too,” she says.

He tilts her further back, holding her up with his palms spread over her shoulders and dropping his head into the vulnerable space between them, kissing her and kissing her. She’s still wet from the shower. There’s almost a clear line down from her breastbone, and he glances up at her for approval before snaking his tongue inside her navel, which makes her laugh again. He smiles into her skin and tilts her back further, feeling where her skin gets thinner. Her nails scratch along his shoulders. He looks up again, unable to bend any further.

He can’t say *please let me eat you out* to her, so he says, “Please can I kiss you?”

Her thighs squeeze his sides. “Jesus, Ben.” There’s a flush all down her cheeks and nose.

“You don’t have to,” he says. “But I would really, really like to.” Maybe she should stay on top? He could slide down the bed further, pull her up so she’s sitting on his collarbone, her hands on the headboard.

“Oh my god,” Bev says, and covers her mouth. “Yeah,” she says, slightly muffled. “Are you sure?”

Ben has no thought that isn’t getting his mouth on her. “Really sure,” he says.

She rolls off him and he follows her, dragging his legs up and out of the way. As she lays back he can see the undersides of her breasts, of her chin, her lips. He looks down at her—she’s wet, he can see it as well as feel her smeared slick across his abdomen. He leans down between her thighs and reaches up to put one of her knees over his shoulder.

Bev says, “Okay, but if you do that I might squeeze your head off, I don’t know.”

Please,” Ben manages, sincerer than he’d like to admit. When she laughs her belly goes tight; he has to run his hand over it and that makes her gasp and shiver. He takes his time, kissing the creases of her hips, around her thighs.

She puts a hand in his hair. *“Ben.”*

He smothers his smile in her skin and kisses her, then uses his thumbs to part her. She smells like sugar and metal; he takes a deep breath and licks over her clit.

“Oh fuck,” Bev gasps.

It sounds like a good sound, so he just shifts his weight lower on the bed and slides one hand under her ass, feeling her muscles tensing and shifting. He could hold her if he wanted, if she’d let him; he could just fold his arms around her hips and bury his whole face in her and get her slick all down his chin and jaw and soaking into his beard. He doesn’t do that; he goes slow and teases and tastes her and feels her hips ratcheting up, flexing forward, feels her thighs start to

shake.

“God you’re good at this, I—” A hitched high gasp. “—oh please I need a little more, that’s really good, I, please, a little faster, I just need yes, ah—” Another gasp.

One of her thighs is pressed tight to his ear and the other is up against his shoulder. He’s glad, he can hear her. He draws her over carefully, delicately, as her *ahs* climb higher and louder and then her back arches and her moan comes out relieved. Her hips flex against his lips and he lets her, he loves her, he could do nothing for the rest of his life except lie in this bed with her fucking up against his mouth, riding him out.

“Okay, okay, come on, in,” Bev says. He deliberately misunderstands and slides his tongue inside her, sour taste rolling into his mouth and making him moan. Her hips jerk. “Fuck. Ben, put something in me, give me your fingers or your cock, I don’t fucking care, I need it.”

He slides one finger inside her and is stunned by how wide and wet she is. He glances back up at her. Her sex flush has turned into frustration, and she’s staring down at him, trying to grind her hips down onto his hand.

“Fuck, you better fuck me,” Bev says.

Ben feels like she’s dealt him a blow over the head, and he’s sure he looks like it too, because the next thing he knows she’s squirming out from under him. He lets her go, sitting up, and the next thing he knows she’s ripping into the condom box and—oh god, this is happening. He hears latex snap and she swears again, throwing one condom aside and reaching for another.

“Here, here here here,” he says, reaching out with his slick hand and taking the packet from her grip. He’s never been so thankful for his steady hands; he rolls the condom on and is about to ask her how she wants to do this but she’s climbing over him already with a fierce look in her eyes. He grabs her hips, half terrified, and she looks him in the eye and slides down onto him. Ben’s spine has never gone that tight before and he groans, trying not to move, trying not to bite through his lip.

Bev settles with her head tilted back slightly, her eyes only half open. She's going to kill him. Ben has never been so turned on he felt physically sick before. He's inside her. He thinks absurdly *she should be inside me too* and leans forward, looking for her lips with his own and missing the first time, having to correct. He kisses her needily, and Bev makes a low hum in her throat and shifts her weight forward.

He leans back for air. "Fuck," he gasps, unable to help it. He can't even close his eyes; he's staring at her.

Bev smiles, shifting her knees on the bed and closing her eyes again. "You're good," she says slowly. Her hips lift up a bit and then come back down, grinding. "You're—oh."

Ben has no idea what he is, but he's desperate to make her come again before he embarrasses himself. He reaches up for her hips, keeping his fingers spread wide apart, telling himself *let her* and *don't hurt her* and *fucking do not come*.

Bev put her hands on his shoulders and uses his weight to balance herself, rocking down on him. He spreads his thighs further and focuses on holding her up; she has a look of intense concentration on her face and if she want to use him—*god she's so hot*—he's happy to be used. He clenches his jaw and tries to get his thumb on her clit, which makes her say *Oh* and stop moving so relentlessly, her thighs on his hips. He pushes his hips up and rubs her furiously, feeling her tighten down as her mouth opens and then she stills, locking down on him and going *tight* and then relaxing, her shoulders slumping as she pulses.

"Bev," he manages.

She looks up at him from under her copper eyelashes.

"I can't—I have to—"

"Fuck, yes," she says, putting his hands on her hips, and Ben loses it a little. He squeezes her too hard, knowing it even as he does it, but the little panting exhalations she's making sound pleased rather than pained, and then he's straining upward into her so deep he lifts her

off the bed, and she makes an *Ahn* sound and Ben comes. It feels like she tears it out of him; he pushes too hard and his thighs shake and strain and he makes an absurd sound he has no control over.

When he manages to get a breath in he relaxes, and Bev's weight settles back over him on the bed. His heart hammers. Her hands run over his skin, chasing from his stomach up to his chest and making him shiver. He pants stupidly.

She's smiling again, looking satisfied and—deservedly—a little smug. “Good?” she asks.

There's actually a headache threatening at the base of his skull and his thighs feel like jelly. “Good,” he says airlessly. “Please let me hold you, I need—”

She shifts uncomfortably but makes no effort to lift off him, instead just lying down on top of him so her breasts slide against his chest. He fits his arms around her shoulders and holds her there, feeling all his blood surging at the perimeter of his skin. Her hair is wet and cold when she lets her head loll on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Bev asks.

“Am I okay?” Ben repeats. He runs his hands down to her hips, checking where he held on to her. There are red marks there, but they're fading. “I'm sorry,” he says, rubbing at first one side and then the other.

“Don't be, you were good,” she says. “I'm gonna...”

He reaches down between their bodies and feels for the edge of the condom. “Yeah, go ahead.” There's a faint grimace on her face when he slides out of her, and then she's up and moving toward the bathroom and Ben ties off the condom and throws it away. He pokes his head into the bathroom and she's wiping a washcloth over her thighs. She glances up at him with a wry look as she cleans herself up.

He can't help it; he steps in beside her and lowers his head to kiss the side of her neck. “Are you okay?” he asks.

She lets the washcloth slap into the sink. “Yeah,” she says. “I’m—good. I needed that.”

There’s fresh sweat under her hair, smelling sharp and clean. He kisses her again. She looks at him through the reflection in the mirror, her eyes knowing. What he wants to do is pick her up and carry her back to the bed—she’s so soft, he loves how soft she is—but also he’s still smeared with his own come and he knows he smells like that and latex. She stands on her toes and plants a chaste kiss on his cheek, and then she walks calmly out of the bathroom. He cleans himself up hurriedly.

When he comes back out she has dragged the sheets and duvet into some kind of order and is lying curled up toward the center. He can’t tell if she’s still naked, but at this point putting on his boxers again would make him feel more conspicuous. She could just watch him as he stands over his suitcase and tucks himself away.

He’s not ready for that.

“Light?” he asks.

She nods.

He turns out the light and crawls into bed after her. Part of him is very aware that they made love for the first time in a bed she’s been sharing with all their friends for the past over two weeks, but the rest of him is aware of the slight clamminess of their sweat, and the shampoo smell wicking up from her clean hair. It should be strange. But he doesn’t feel like he’s... missing anything. Everything that came before were roots—if she loved Bill first, that’s fine, if she slept in a heap with Richie and Eddie, if she smoked outside with Mike and fitted him for a suit, if she saw Stan in the mirror and they cried together. Ben’s here, with her. Somewhere in the magic that they all carried together, there’s space for just them too.

“I do love you,” he whispers, because he can’t help himself.

There’s a soft little sound as she smiles, as her eyelashes brush the pillow. “I know. I love you too.” She’s quiet for a moment, as her words glow inside him like a coal, and she says, “I don’t know how

yet. But this is part of it."

The qualifier, instead of diminishing what she said, just seems to sharpen it, bringing in nuance and meaning. Ben's all right with that. It means more than the *I love you* after sex, or during. It means she's thinking about it, turning it over and over in her mind, mapping out the edges. *This is part of it* means that there's more to the shape of it that she wants to find out.

She rolls over onto him in the dark and puts her head on his chest and their bodies fit together under the sheets. One of her knees hitches up over his hip, soft and warm and comfortable. She's gorgeous as ever and he wants her and he loves her but it's enough, in this moment, to lie close together instead of separated. He thinks he was made to hold her like this.

Her breathing slows and shallows and he closes his eyes and matches himself to her. He settles into sleep as heavy as bones sinking to the bottom of the sea.

Notes for the Chapter:

Me, looking over my draft: "4 pages of sex? Really?
Really?"

Also me: "Yes, really, just post it."

Look I knew they were gonna get here, I just didn't know it would happen juxtaposed against the previous scenes OR that it would be such a big scene. Just turned out that way. *shakes head* Anyway, thank you for reading! You can find me in the comments.

5. Out in the Rain

Summary for the Chapter:

Bev makes a phone call. Ben keeps his temper.

Notes for the Chapter:

Content warnings for this chapter: canonical violence (Henry Bowers, Tom Rogan); discussion of domestic abuse; Richie's getting stir crazy and it's really annoying; Ben has trauma he's not acknowledging; short-term memory loss in-scene; discussion of suicide; mention of infidelity (Bill).

Bev testifies.

Eddie testified, and then he left. Bev got a text from him this morning, just a little yellow heart in her notifications. She smiles, and then she testifies and holds that image of the heart in her head as she makes eye contact first with Mr. Deaver and then with the prosecutor.

Then Ben testifies, and the prosecutor objects every twenty seconds it seems like to Ben's account not only of finding Eddie on the landing, but also of Bowers cutting him as a child. The judge overrules them, but denies Deaver's effort to submit a photograph of Ben's scar into evidence. There's no proof that Bowers made it, and now the scar looks like a mess of broken lines instead of an H. Ben's face doesn't change at all when the ruling is made, but Bev watches him, looking for some kind of tell. She can't find one.

Afterwards, they go back to the Townhouse—even Richie is subdued—and Bev goes up to her room and calls Kay.

Kay picks up. “Bev?”

“It’s me,” Bev confirms. “Are you all right?”

“Right as I think I can be at the moment,” Kay replies. “How about you? Don’t tell me where you are.”

Right. Because Kay is still afraid that Tom might come back, despite the restraining order and the police protection.

“I’m fine,” Bev says. “I testified in a court case today.”

“Oh yeah?” Kay seems interested. “Not related to that piece of shit, huh?”

“No,” Bev says. “I’m not supposed to talk about details, but I have a friend in trouble.”

“A *friend*?” Kay asks.

“Yes, a friend,” Bev says.

“Not the Italian guy on the phone from the other night?”

Bev snorts. “He’s not Italian, he’s just from New York. I’m not in New York,” she says quickly. “And that’s Eddie. Different guy.”

“Did you leave Tom and go out and find a passel of men friends to serve your every whim?” Kay asks. “Because, like, I don’t get it, but good for you.”

Bev laughs and lays down on the bed, phone to her ear. “Not quite,” she says. “These are old friends. From childhood.”

“I never heard you talk about any men before.” Kay pauses. “Not that you would have had the chance, in that house.”

“You knew me before that.”

“No, yeah,” Kay agrees.

“No, I never talked about them. Barely remembered them. But.” Bev blinks. “It’s better.”

“It would fucking have to be.”

She draws in a deep breath. “Kay, I’m really sorry about—”

“If you’re about to apologize to me for what that son of a bitch did,” Kay says, “I will hang up the fucking phone.”

Bev lets out her breath and closes her eyes. “Okay.”

“He was pretty ripped up, too. Did one of your *friends* do that, or did you just kick his ass on your way out?”

Telling Kay on the phone is different from confessing to Ben in the kitchen, throwing teacups at the wall.

“That was me,” Bev says.

“You should have killed him.”

“You know, I think you’re right.”

Kay is quiet for several moments. She says, “I don’t know if you’re ever coming back, but there’s a media shitstorm over here, girl. I put my photos in the goddamn paper. I’m coming for his fucking life.”

“Yeah,” Bev says.

“And none of it is your fault,” Kay says. “But eventually someone’s gonna ask, *Where’s Beverly Marsh?* Someone more than just him. So tell me you’re not going back to him.”

“Never,” Bev says. Her hips still feel loose-jointed from riding Ben the other night; she rolls her knee back and forth to feel the shift.

“Okay,” says Kay. “I’m not sorry for what I’m going to do to him, but I don’t want you to get caught up in it.”

“I didn’t want you to get caught up in it either.” Her voice comes out in a squeak and she pushes one hand against her eye.

“I know you fucking didn’t,” Kay says brusquely. “God, I’m so glad you didn’t call me. I would have loved to help you run, but I’m glad I couldn’t give you up. Couldn’t give him what he wanted. *Fuck.*” Her voice goes a little thick toward the end. “Listen, sweetie.”

“Yeah.”

“At some point, someone’s gonna ask me if I knew he was hitting you,” Kay says.

Bev just listens. She's been watching Ben do that for the last couple weeks, watching him spur people into speaking. Today on the stand was just the Exhibit A of it, watching him stare at the prosecutor, waiting for a direct question.

"And I'm gonna have to say yes," Kay says.

"I know."

"Look, the goal here is not to drag your marriage into the public eye."

"I know, I know." She rolls over onto her back and says, "Shit, Kay, he cut off my credit cards."

"He did?"

"I've got a Macy's card and another man's good will."

"Fucker," Kay says, low and vehement. Then she says, "Better than tracking you with them, I guess."

"I know." Bev still isn't sure what to make of that one—she's sure that if she sees him again he'll try to kill her, though she feels better about her chances now. It's not that Tom has stopped being large and frightening and in control—it's that after It, nothing is going to scare her that deep ever again. What is only a man?

And it's easy to think that, halfway across the country and tucked up safe in her bed in the Townhouse. She's still curiously removed.

"He's got half my company, Kay," Bev sighs. "My designs. My... intellectual property." Everything she left in the studio, everything she left in the house. Even if she wants her money—she deserves her money—she has no idea what he could have destroyed in the meantime. Her earliest sketches, any way to prove that the ideas were hers and he was just—a pair of long reaching arms, pointing her at buyers and whipping drawings out from under her hands.

She used to tell herself that she was the creativity, and Tom was the logic. He never said boo to her about her designs, never bitched at her about the way she prepped for shows. He just looked through her

portfolio and got a serious, convicted look in his eye. At the time she let herself believe he was impressed by her, but. It was the same look he had looking at her short-cut fingernails, or watching her makeup melt off her face when she cried. Tom found a weakness and he pressed.

What was left now? Bev left her whole life behind. She's been managing without it so far—and maybe he meant to punish her by cutting her off—but she thinks back to that moment when she left the house and realized it was going to be for the last time. The sense of relief from setting her ring down on the wall and laughing with her dirty bloody feet. *I'm free.*

So she got rid of him at last. What will he try to come after now?

Well, the company. The things that are hers, that she made, that she dragged into the world with her time and her tears and her sleepless nights. Taking money for them and withholding it from her. *Rogan&Marsh*. It was Marsh, it should have just been Marsh from day one. The way that suddenly she was suddenly selling into every store, every buyer, as soon as Tom suggested they venture out on their own —was that the influence of It, the reason that all of them were doing so well but Mike was left to wither in the library? Or was it Tom himself? What will happen to her without either of them?

“Still there, girl?” Kay asks.

“Yeah,” Bev says. She clears her throat. “I’m seeing someone else. I’m going to divorce him.”

“Already?” Kay asks. “Good for you. What’s he like?”

Bev weighs how much she dares say about Ben—who’s famous in his own right—without tipping Kay off as to where she is or where she might go.

“Sweet,” she says at last. “Generous to a fault. Dedicated.” She thinks of their hands together, her reaching out for him in a slick of blood and mud, him pressing ceramics into her grip, her grabbing him by the wrist and laying his palm on her breast. “He’s different.”

"He better fucking be," Kay says. "When the dust settles, I'm going to see you again."

And that means that someday, Kay thinks, Tom will no longer be a threat. That they can break him totally.

Bev thinks of proof of residency, of Chicago divorce lawyers and court orders and all the paperwork she left behind when she ran.

Too late now, she thinks. She's safe. *You got out.*

Now she has to get out of Maine, before she can worry about the rest of her life. After the trial, she tells herself. After the trial.

She texts Eddie back his heart. He doesn't reply, but Bev hopes he's safe.

Richie wants them to go back to the clubhouse.

Well, he wants them to get high, but he wants them to go back into the clubhouse. It's a two-pronged attack—first, he makes comments about Ben's sex life instead of just his body, and if Ben's not exactly comfortable with people talking about how he looks, the idea of people commenting on Bev and what they do in bed together makes him furious.

Bev doesn't seem to mind. She smirks and looks not at all ashamed—which is good, because if Richie were shaming her Ben would drag him outside. He doesn't want Bev to ever see him raise hands to someone, but he's also not going to let anyone run their mouth about her.

But Bev seems to think it's a good joke and plays along, and he follows her lead like she's the barometer of the pressure in the room.

"I'm just saying the smokeshow worked once—and I don't mean Haystack over there, because that is not the face of a woman getting the bare minimum."

Ben has worked a lot more than once by now. He glares at his

toothpicks like they're the problem.

"Problem, Richie?" Bev asks, her voice as smooth as silk.

"Nah, mostly just questions, like, how much weight did you lose in your dick? And do you miss it?"

His hand slips and he stabs himself in the pad of the finger with the toothpick he was handling. A little puncture wound rests in his fingerprint. He yanks the stick out and suppresses the urge to stick his finger in his mouth and sulk.

Mike intervenes first. "Richie."

Ben gets up and goes over to the bar. "I have changed my mind, I would like to resume drinking." He sits down on the barstool farthest from Richie and pours himself the last of the whiskey, and then submerges his injury in it for sterilization.

"Not missing anything," Beverly pronounces.

Ben looks up at her, at the wicked smile on her face, and then abruptly looks down into his glass. He's glad she's happy—there's a knot of something like pride somewhere in his chest? he thinks?—but he still feels like he did back on the day he met them all, when he sat on the box outside the drugstore and waited for Eddie to come back with handfuls of gauze and rubbing alcohol.

That's part of the problem. Eddie's gone and Richie's starting to lose his grip without anyone to shout him down. Bev is pretty good at redirecting Richie, and Mike sometimes definitely channels the town librarian aspect when he puts on his disapproving face, but Richie's an unstoppable force. Ben is not so much an immovable object as a mountain getting dynamited for a tunnel, and Richie doesn't know when to stop before he goes straight through him.

"So if we smoke up—we were able to see basically all the dinosaurs die, right? I think we should do it again."

Ben remembers that day—remembers how angry Bev had been with him and Bill for not wanting her to participate when they all went below ground and started a wet fire. Ben remembers the sting in his

eyes and his chest and the way the clubhouse had expanded around him. Their magic made the world bigger, not smaller. He might not have seen what Richie and Mike came out claiming to have seen, but he remembers how suddenly there were yards between them, how his load-bearing pillars were too few and far between, and the way the light cut into the smoke when the trapdoor opened and they climbed out one by one.

They had to go in to get him and Mike before they died down there, Ben remembers. It was the first thing he thought of, when Bill came back dragging Richie out of Its lair. He had been sick and exhausted and when he reached out to help he thought his strength was going to fail him, but Mike had reached out to help.

“Why?” Mike asks. His brow is furrowed, thinking, like he’s considering it.

Ben doesn’t want him to consider it. He thinks that if he ever has to go back to that clubhouse, no matter how old and sound, he’ll never come out of it.

“To see—” Richie flails his hands. “—the stuff we can’t see now. The things that are going on but we don’t get a look at.”

Ben’s gaze slides over to Bev, who has gone white. She says she hasn’t seen Stanley since Bill left, and he believes her. He shakes his head. “Didn’t work for us all last time.”

“And what did work was because of the magic. The magic’s gone now,” Mike says, in the authoritative voice of the man who explained to them all who they were and why they were here.

Richie still blinks, looking thrown. “Are you sure?”

Ben glances at Beverly again. Bev’s theory is that it only works when they’re all together, and with Bill and Eddie gone they’re weaker. Still stronger than they would be otherwise—stronger together than alone—but something broke the other night, when they agreed to split up.

Ben dreams.

He dreams and he wakes up with Bev in his arms, dry and unbloodied and without the soil spilling in on him, but he still has to get up and walk into the bathroom and open the window. He takes deep gulping breaths of the night air, and then he closes the window and locks it, remembering Eddie.

Mike's face goes tight. "What's happening."

Richie puts his hands together. "I do not remember how many days we've been in this hotel," he says matter-of-factly. It's flippant, but for some reason Ben forgets that for as much shit as Richie talks, he's smart, too. "I get up and I go to my court appearances and I tell Deaver every stupid thing I've done in my life and I eat food and I come home. And for some reason, even though we're all fucking middle-aged, we were able to have a never-ending sleepover without our skeletons literally revolting against us."

"Um," Bev points out delicately.

"That was a muscle and it's because I just have so many goddamn muscles," Richie says. "Not the same thing."

Well that's not how the human body works. "It's quality, not quantity," Ben murmurs, but he's thinking about the flow of time. He knows Deaver is billing him for his work, he sees the emails land in his inbox, and he pays them. But he would believe that it's the end of September, or he would believe that they've been here for months.

Richie twists his arm backwards to point at him without turning around. "Thank you, Haystack. Legally you are now my personal trainer."

Ben raises his eyebrows in acknowledgement and takes a sip of his drink.

"Come on, Mike. The night we all stopped crashing together like a bunch of college kids testing out their Hep C vaccinations." Well that's not how vaccinations work either. Ben misses Eddie. "Did you dream?"

Oh.

"As soon as we stepped out of that room together, did you dream?"

Mike looks away, shaking his head slowly as he thinks. "So we're a little funny on the calendar while we're recovering. That happens after traumatic events sometimes. You forget the details because survival is more important."

And Ben's sure that's true. But he also wonders, just a little bit, if he goes into his email, how many invoices will he find from Deaver? And how many of them will have the same date on them, but different hours? And he's sure every one of them will be true.

Ben doesn't feel like he's missing days. But he doesn't know what day it is. Has to be a weekday because they went to court today, right? He takes out his phone to check, and—

"What did you see, Mike?" Richie asks.

Ben looks up in time to see Mike frown. Then he says, "I'll tell you after your trial."

Richie can't take no for an answer. "Why? What's the point in hiding it?" He twists around to look at Ben for help. "Did you dream? Or did the magical power of Beverly's—"

They're not doing this. Ben drops his phone as he points at Richie. "Fucking watch it, Tozier."

Richie holds up his hands as if he's never heard the word *vagina* in his life. "—*hotel room*, John Wick, jeez. Did you dream?" Without waiting for an answer he looks to Bev. "Did you?"

Ben looks over Richie's shoulder, watching Bev. She looks contemplative, but not frightened.

Sometimes Ben hears her shifting in her sleep, feels her turning her head. Sometimes she presses her face hard into his chest and making a small sound, but she doesn't wake.

Bev puts one hand to her mouth as she thinks, then looks up at Richie. "Did you dream because of the deadlights?"

"No," Richie says firmly, and Ben hears the lie. But Richie ploughs on. "It wasn't the deadlights. It was something else. And I had my paranoid moments in that room—the 'am I gonna open the bathroom door and find half a kid tap dancing at me' moments—" That's a new one for Ben. "—but I didn't dream. I didn't have screaming nightmares in there."

Richie sleeps two floors away from Ben and Bev. If he was having screaming nightmares, Ben wouldn't know.

He asks, "Are you having screaming nightmares now?"

Richie's jaw looks mulish. "No, but they're coming. Despite popular belief I am a relatively sane person, and that's how I know they're coming."

Bev says quietly, "I dreamed."

They all look at her.

She squares her jaw. Ben loves that cleft in her chin, how young and tough it makes her look. She glares at Richie. "What do you want to do?"

"I think we should smoke up the clubhouse again."

"No."

Everyone looks at him. Richie twists all the way around. Even Mike raises his eyebrows.

Feeling the eyes on him and unable to look at Bev, Ben shakes his head. "No way."

But Richie can't take no for an answer. "You can't be that precious about it after—"

He's not talking about this. "If we go into the clubhouse, it'll collapse." Ben doesn't know if this is the truth or if it's a fear, but he feels it. He doesn't know what will bring it down—the lack of magic that held it preserved for thirty years, when he was just thirteen and putting around with ideas from an architecture book? It, trying to

crush him for a second time?

Richie is staring behind his big glasses. “We were just there,” he says. “Tell me you do a better job building skyscrapers.”

Ben thinks about immoveable forces, about the way Eddie said, calmly and reasonably, *We'll be seventy years old, asshole* when Richie had a shit idea the first night they were here.

“The magic was holding it up,” Ben says. He believes that much. If he heard of a clubhouse made by a thirteen-year-old underground now, he wouldn’t go into it. “It’s gone now.” He takes a breath and fills his lungs, holding his chest tense for the hit. “And even if it weren’t, I’m not going down there again.”

He waits for Richie to pounce on this fear, or for Bev to look understanding at him about it.

Neither happens.

“The magic—the magic’s not gone! It’s not! It’s still around, and I don’t know what it wants! And I’m open to better ideas, guys!” He holds his arms out and twists in his chair, turning from Ben to Mike to Bev, a gladiator appealing to the Coliseum.

Mike speaks to reason. “The smoke should have killed us last time.” As though demonstratively, he takes a deep breath. “You and I got sick, but our lungs didn’t swell up and we didn’t drown in them. That’s what the magic saved us from. And all of us tried last time. Stan. Bill and Eddie. You know we won last time because we were together, it’s the only reason we got out clean.”

Richie laughs in a low and threatening way. “*Clean?*” he asks. “What about Bev’s psychic powers, huh?”

Bev’s lips go white.

But Richie’s on a roll. “Or how about how hearing you name my goddamn hometown was enough to have me blowing chunks, which I now know is the same response I have to *actual murder*? Or how about the bug that got planted in Stanny’s head, huh? How clean was that, if when it came to collect—?”

Bev's face in the kitchen when she told Ben how Stan started to bleed in front of her—

"No."

He didn't realize he was going to say it until it's out of his mouth.

Richie goes silent and he turns around to look at him, no longer speechifying. He's not smiling. Ben knows this look on his face—not just from being a kid, enumerating his grievances to Bill before reaching out and grabbing a baseball bat; but from the trial, when Ben described Eddie's *Hey guys?* and staggering out onto the landing with blood running down his face and neck. Ben feels like he can see through him all of a sudden, to a deep and profound absence within him. It lurches up out of him in weird moments, like the one that at last caused Ben to put Henry Deaver's number in Richie's hand and tell him to call.

For a moment Ben thinks Richie might take a swing at him.

Into the silence, Mike says, "We'll work out something else, Richie. But we're stronger together. And that almost killed us with seven. I'm not gonna try it with four. Anything you want to do, we're waiting until Bill and Eddie come back."

Richie's arms drop and his shoulders slump. He looks down at the floor instead of at any of them.

"What makes you think they're coming back?"

Oh.

Ben can see through him indeed—straight through all the bullshit and negative space into a deep and profound fear. He watched Bill and Richie shoving each other in the street after Eddie got into a taxi to go to the hospital, and he had no idea what to make of them except for Bev behind him screaming *Stop*.

Bev stands up and Richie recoils, like he wasn't expecting a response. Ben watches her carefully—her eyes are dark and liquid but steady and certain. "They will," she says. "They said they would."

Richie smiles thinly, averting his eyes and shaking his head. He's no taller than Ben, but he acts like he is, craning his neck and looking down at Bev, head still shaking.

"So did Stan," he says.

He's scared. That's the problem. He's scared and he's on trial for murder and he's spiraling. If he sits here and keeps talking Ben's going to lose his temper, and he can't do that with Bev in the room, and Mike can only be the voice of reason but what's reason among the Losers Club? Richie needs convincing, and there's only one of them who can do that.

Ben reaches for his phone but finds it's already out on the table. He doesn't remember putting it down, and he doesn't think he's been drinking much, but he picks it up and holds it out toward Richie.

"Call him," he says.

The look Richie turns to him is almost drunk in its slackness and blankness.

Ben raises his eyebrows. "Call him right now. I have the international plan, you can take my phone and talk to him."

Richie blinks slowly and a little light comes back into his eyes. "What's the time difference, like, six hours?"

"Five," Ben says. "Do it. Call him."

Richie reaches out slowly, like it's a trick. "So just to be clear." He lifts the phone out of Ben's hand but doesn't quite take it. "You're giving me free license to take your cell phone and call Bill at three in the morning and run up your overseas charges."

Ben will do literally anything to stop this meltdown he's trying to have in the Townhouse bar. "Talk to me when you want to call up Hong Kong."

Richie makes a weird face and bobs his head, then holds up the phone. "Fine, but if I find nudes on here it's your own fault for leaving me unsupervised."

Bev acknowledges and responds to the joke. She snorts when she laughs. It's cute. "That is one hundred percent not how that works."

"Sure it is. You know me, you know the hazards of my operating system. There's no self-control brake switch in here. No take-backs." He holds up the phone to Ben and raises his eyebrows in almost a challenge, then drops it into his shirt pocket.

Ben wonders if he's going to have to go buy another phone.

"Taking it upstairs?" Mike asks.

Richie levers himself out of the barstool and slouches toward the stairs. "Yeah, I'm gonna try to pay Haystack back for the fees by charging Bill for phone sex." He leaves the room and they all listen to him climbing the staircase like it's a gallows. Eventually his footsteps go out of earshot.

Bev breaks the silence. "I saw him overdose."

Ben feels his eyebrows lift. "Here?"

She shakes her head. "In my dreams. The ones where we die. Richie overdosed, but I asked him, and he says he's never done hard drugs, not like that."

Mike leans forward in his chair, puts his elbows on his knees, and knots his fingers together. "I've been thinking."

Ben leans forward too, listening. Bev sits back down in her chair. She kicks off her shoes and folds her knees up against the armrest sideways, her bare toes just on the edge of the seat.

Mike lifts his head and says, "Ben, if you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?"

Ben blinks once; he knows that having a plan is a really big step towards suicidality. "No," he says.

"I'm not saying you're really going to do it, I'm saying if."

"No," he says. "We're not doing that."

“So don’t tell me—do you have an answer?”

The little sting where he stuck his finger reminds him that he has whiskey on the table. He reaches down and grabs his drink, saying nothing.

The answer is poison. He can’t even say it’s something he’s thought about until this moment, or whether he’s just influenced by the glass in his hand, but that would be it for him, wouldn’t it? It would be poison. But like fuck he’s going to say that out loud, ever.

“Bev, what did you see happening to Ben?”

Bev says nothing but draws her knees closer to her chest. She looks from Ben to Mike.

Mike senses the mood in the room and changes his tactics. “My theory is that the visions you’ve been having—the visions of us killing ourselves—they came from It. They came from the deadlights. But I don’t think it’s seeing the future. I think they’re lies. I think they’re just torturing you.”

Bev’s head sways a little bit on her shoulders.

“But Stan,” she says quietly.

Mike lowers his head. “I don’t think—I don’t think that was right.”

Well it was a suicide, of course it wasn’t right.

“I think that It killed him,” Mike says. “I think It stayed in his head and when he knew it was time to go back, I think It... I think It drove him to it. I don’t think.” He sighs. “I don’t know. I know that suicide is—” He gestures vaguely. “Something doesn’t add up.”

Ben’s glass breaks.

He gasps but none of the shards cut him; whiskey sluices over his palm, down his wrist, onto his lap. Beverly startles up out of her chair, saying, “Are you hurt?”

He thrusts his hand out over the bar and widens his fingers, trying to

let the pieces of broken glass just fall out of his hand. “I don’t think I’m hurt,” he says. He shakes his hand and the last few bits of glass fall away, and when he turns his palm over he doesn’t see any cuts. He doesn’t feel any pain either, except from where he stuck himself earlier. He looks back up at Mike, who is watching him. “That wasn’t me,” he says. “I wasn’t squeezing it, I haven’t even had enough to drink.”

Mike looks to Bev.

Beverly is staring not at Ben’s palm, but at one of the framed photographs behind the bar. Ben looks at her, follows her gaze, and then looks at the light fixture overhead, trying to work out what kind of reflections she’ll be able to see in the glare.

“Is it him?” Mike asks. “Do you see him?”

Bev shakes her head. “No,” she says. “I thought I did. But it was just...” She shakes her head. “The light.”

“You haven’t seen him since Bill left?” Mike asks.

“Before then,” she says. “We talked. Or—he used sign language, I don’t know. He got...” She closes her eyes. “He got agitated. I brought up his wife and he got upset, and he started bleeding. He wasn’t before then.”

Mike covers his mouth.

Ben feels they’re missing an obvious step here and says out loud, “Stan?”

Nothing happens.

“Stan?” he repeats. “Stanley? Stanley Uris?”

Nothing.

“God, what if we’re the reason he can’t move on?” Bev asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ben doesn’t know. He’s pretty sure that Judaism doesn’t have an

afterlife the way Christianity does; he doesn't know if Stan still being present defies expectations. But he knows that Bev—was frightened, when she saw him the first time. But not the second time. The second time she was just sad.

And It was never about just making them sad.

"Stanley, it's okay," Ben says. "We're going to be okay. It wasn't your fault, and it's okay."

He'd take anything at this point—another glass breaking, the lights going in and out, cold spots. But there's nothing. He can feel the moment when they all release their collective held breath, disappointed.

He lowers his head. There's whiskey drying on his hand and arm, and on his jeans.

"You didn't tell me you were dreaming," he says to Bev, before he realizes he shouldn't have said that in front of Mike.

Bev says, "I'm not, really." She doesn't seem shy at all about it; her eyes are so large. "I've never slept better in my entire—well. Since I left Derry the first time. I'm not dreaming of us dying anymore, just—things I know never happened. Because it's too late for them now."

Mike tilts his head to the side, curious.

She shakes her head. "I dream I'm a kid again, only I have all this long hair," she says. "I hated my hair when I was little—I cut it off, but." She shakes her head, something dark passing over her face before it clears again. "And seeing Patrick Hockstetter—he wandered into a sewer pipe, in my dream, but I remember watching him. Him and his fridge, out by the dump. It got him, and I saw it."

"I dream too," Mike says. "That Bowers hurt me a lot worse than he managed to. Put me in the hospital." He closes his eyes, grimaces, looks away. "I don't know what these are. If we killed It, I don't know why we're having these dreams. Even if I'm glad you're no longer dreaming about us killing ourselves, Beverly."

"I'm glad too," Bev says.

Ben looks down. He dreams things that happened. Being chased out of the locker room in high school, landing on the cold linoleum and crying. The dirt filling up in the club house, over and over again, and Bev reaching out and grabbing him. He doesn't know what he'd do, if he dreamed that and she never came. A vampire in a snowstorm with a mouth full of razor blades. A mummy. All his B-movie nightmares. A headless little boy. A balloon, flying proudly despite the raging wind around it.

"I need to go to bed," he says.

Bev looks up at him. "Do you need me to come too, or do you need a moment to yourself?"

He shakes his head and shrugs; he doesn't want to inconvenience her.

Her gaze sharpens. "Let's go up," she says, and gets out of her chair.

"Sorry, Mike," Ben says.

Mike shakes his head. "Don't be. I've got... plenty to think about."

Bev goes with him. She doesn't ask him any questions about his dreams or ways he might hurt himself. Instead she slides into her pajamas and wraps both arms around his waist in the dark, her ear pressed to his solar plexus.

"Don't go," she says. "Stay right here."

"I'm not going anywhere," he says.

And when he wakes in the night, gasping and suffocating, he remembers, and he doesn't get up and go to the window.

It starts raining in Derry.

It's time to leave.

Bill comes back.

He doesn't bother meeting them at the Townhouse, he walks straight into the courtroom, and one of the many knots in Bev's gut loosens and then tightens when she sees him. It was misting when they left for the courthouse, but the sun baked the condensation off the closer they got to Bangor itself. Her hair feels unruly as it did when she was a kid, not wanting to stay in the chignon.

Richie looks liable to leap the bar to the gallery, but his lawyer has better sense than that and restrains him. Bev gets up from her bench, but it's right that Richie hugs Bill first.

Bill looks tired. He vanishes into Richie, but his hand thumps his back. "How you doing, man?"

"B-b-better and better, Big Bill."

Bill pats the back of Richie's head, takes a step back, and turns directly into Bev.

She has to hug him; she can't not, but she invokes his wife in the same breath, too: "How's Audra?" *Did you tell her? Did you tell her what we did, how we hurt her for no good reason?* She doesn't know whether she wants Bill to answer *yes* or *no*. She doesn't know anything about his wife aside from that she's an actress and Bill married her, and it's not the same as her with Tom (or at least she can hope it's not), but Bev blowing up her marriage has already had casualties. The idea of another one is just more than she can take right now.

He hugs her back, gingerly. "She understands," he says, and Bev doesn't know if she believes him. "What I told her about Richie, anyway. She understands." And that's a lot easier to believe. "I told her I'd be here and back, just have to tie up loose ends."

Is Bev a loose end? She doesn't want to be a loose end. She feels she put a pretty firm knot on that issue when she kissed Ben in the quarry, when she grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the dirt, when Bill tried to apologize to her in the hospital.

Bill takes a step back and smiles. “And then she and I are gonna go away for a little bit.”

Bev mirrors his smile, instinctive. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, we’re in post-production now, she’s been working hard, she’s earned a little time off. And I don’t think movies are right for me, you know. I think this was a one-and-done deal.” He holds his arm out for Ben.

Ben moves in without hesitation. She doesn’t know what he’s thinking, but he seems untroubled by Bill. He even makes a joke out of the greeting, pretending like they’re only going to shake hands, before he smiles and hugs him properly. “You know where you’re gonna go?”

“Not yet. Mike made Florida sound pretty nice, but I don’t know.” He lets go of Ben and hugs Mike, and vanishes into him. Bev always forgets how small Bill is, when he’s by himself. He has that gravitas.

“Hey, we could go together. There’s one of the space race museums down there, right? Might be nice to walk into a museum just for fun. Think you can talk Mrs. Denbrough into that?”

“Into meeting my old friend? Yeah, I think she’d be game for that. We’ll buy you dinner.”

“It’s a whole evening.”

Eddie is still missing—he never responded after Bev sent him that little heart the other day—but they all file into the row directly behind the defense table. Four of them again, and Richie sitting point beside Deaver. Bev put stitches in his suit with her own two hands, but she can’t make him armor; and after all this, is Henry Bowers really going to be the thing that separates them for good?

And then Eddie comes in.

He slides into the end of the row beside Ben and leans over to whisper, “What did I miss?” His eyes look a little wild, and he’s not wearing a suit but instead a rumpled polo that he definitely slept in, but he’s here. He glances from Ben to Richie and then back.

“Closing,” Ben replies. “This is it.”

This is it.

This is as strong as they can be, in the moment they need it the most.

Bev looks for a reflection, for something, looking for Stanley because he should be here, it has to be them, it should be all of them.

But there’s nothing.

Richie’s lawyer gets up and in the half a breath where he’s unsupervised, Richie turns to look at them all behind him. He looks like a live wire—and then he turns back around, reclines slightly, and the line of his shoulders relax.

Mr. Deaver’s closing remarks are very nice. The intercession where the jury retreats to consider the fate of Richie’s whole life is interminable. Bev watches them file out and wants to cover her face with her hands.

“It was good, though, right?” Eddie asks. “I missed the prosecutor—Deaver was better, right?”

They are not allowed to talk to Richie, not allowed to whisper to him. Richie doesn’t even turn around.

Bill leans across Bev to whisper to Eddie. “Deaver responded to what she said pretty well. And it’s gonna be the last thing in their minds. And Maine has castle doctrine, and Mike didn’t just live at the library, he worked there, it was a public space. He sh—”

Bev has an intense view of Bill’s profile as his eye flares wide and then he shakes his head, declining to finish his sentence.

Outside she can hear rain.

Ben reaches down between them and takes her hand. Just gently. His fingers are wider than hers, and when she laces them together her own stretch, but it’s not painful. His hold is loose and her hold is tight, like she can steady herself on him, like she’s been trying to steady herself on him this whole time and he’s just letting her.

God, Ben.

No matter what happens, they're going to walk away from this together. Bev's freedom is not on the line.

But it's going to be so, so much harder to fight Tom for what's hers without Richie and Mike in her corner.

"It was good," Mike says. "Deaver was good."

The jury returns.

They find in favor of the defendant. Not guilty by reason of justifiable homicide.

Mike is so relieved he actually slumps sideways onto Bill. Ben, who up until that point was doing an amazing job projecting absolute calm and patience, also seems to go limp as his hidden tension releases. Bev is a little surprised he did such a good job at hiding it, though she can feel a sliver of unease sliding into place in her brain. No time to identify it now, but something she'll have to take out and turn over in her hands later.

When the court adjourns, Richie climbs straight over the railing into the gallery. Eddie goes into paroxysms of panic: "Your back! Your back!"

Richie looks liable to lift Eddie off his feet as he sweeps him in for a hug. "No, you're back. Jesus, Eds, way to make an entrance."

"I didn't make an entrance, I was trying not to make an entrance, I didn't want to distract the jury if things were going well."

"What were you gonna do if things were going badly? Dress in drag and do the hula?" He lets Eddie go but leans on him hard.

Bev frowns a little bit. *The Lion King?* Really? Richie must be really shaken up.

Now there's time to appreciate that Eddie's back. Immediately Eddie reaches for Bill and hugs him, ducking his head and leaning on him in turn. "Missed you, Bill."

They all did. Maybe there was no getting around his absence, not like Eddie who just seemed to belong in the Townhouse with them. But they missed him.

Bev can feel something building between them, some kind of tension. She looks around for a reflective surface again and—Richie's glasses. She tries to step to the side to get a better perspective on the glare she knows they'll produce.

Bill says to Eddie, "Missed you too. How did it go?"

"Fine," Eddie says. "It went fine. I would have been here sooner but I had to stop to sleep, I wasn't..."

Richie shifts his head just slightly and Bev can see in the reflection in his glasses, not five figures, but six. Her heart thuds. Richie has no idea. "What about me? Did you miss me?"

It's half relief, half anticipation that makes Bev lean forward to hug him. "You don't let anyone miss you, Richie."

Mr. Deaver comes back to say his goodbyes. Richie turns his head and the little shadow of Stan vanishes, but Bev knows what she saw. Not like the letters shifting on the old apartment, Marsh to Kersh—she has no doubt this time. Mike turns to say goodbye to the lawyer as well, and when he turns back around he steps in to close a circle they've all instinctively made in this space between bench and railing.

Bev looks over at Ben. He smiles. Not her favorite smile, where he looks young, but something confidential.

Richie lowers his head and his voice and says, "All right, Mike this is as many of us as we're gonna get. Are you ready now?"

He has no idea. But he can't mean to smoke up the clubhouse, or the Townhouse again or something?

"You don't want to wait?" Mike asks. "You don't think we've done enough for today?"

Ben asked Bev if she wanted to wait, but she felt some kind of rush

behind her—some kind of engine driving her, saying if not now, then it would be never. She feels her breath coming faster—that same drive quietly building up in her.

“I wanna get it out now. And fast,” Richie says.

“What are you talking about?” Eddie hasn’t been in the Townhouse, listening to them argue with each other, watching Richie flailing his hands and speaking of visions; and Bev doesn’t think she ever told them about Stan, who’s here, she just knows it. They closed the circle without him, but for all she knows he’s standing in the middle, watching them all talk through him.

“Not here, Eds.” Richie’s eyes flick to all of them, energetic in a way that they haven’t been since they threw themselves into the quarry. When he makes eye contact with Bev, his mouth twitches slightly in a smile. “Back to the Townhouse. Right now.”

Bev’s in.

Ben is, as usual, the one who has to be practical. “Don’t you have, like, legal shit to do? Things to sign?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. Let’s go. Eds, are you in my car?”

There’s a little wrench in Bev’s gut at the reminder that they did not all come here together, they will have to separate in order to go back and be together again. She reaches down for Ben’s hand again. They work out who’s driving where, and Richie actually puts his keys in Beverly’s free hand.

When they all spill out into the lobby, Mike pauses ahead of them, looking at the rain flowing down the windows. It’s not a cloudburst by any means, but it feels like it followed them from Derry. He turns to look at Bev. “Do you need an umbrella?”

Richie pushes through the metal detector and out the door, heedless of the weather.

Mike calls back after him, “Tozier! Ain’t nothing worth catching a cold for!”

If Richie hears, he doesn't acknowledge it, instead choosing to do a pose Bev's pretty sure she saw in a movie once. She laughs, almost in spite of herself, and then she lets go of Ben to follow him out into the open air. The rain is too light to be cold, but she takes the clip out of her hair and feels it slowly start to slide out of place. She shakes her head so that her court hairstyle loosens, and is sure her mascara's running.

"There you go, Bev," Richie says, definitely blinded with the water on his glasses.

Bev turns back to look at the front door and—Stan's standing there. Between her and Richie. Unaffected by the rain, his curls as soft and fluffy as ever, his face serious.

"We gotta go," Bev says.

Ben is smiling when he steps out of the courthouse, but when he sees her expression his face turns serious as well.

In Mike's truck, which Ben drove here so that Mike could arrive in time to speak to the lawyer too, Bev slides into place between Mike and Ben and feels their shoulders press into hers. She strips off her jacket and lets her bare arms touch the fabric of their suits, a little chilled and a little relieved.

"Do you want my jacket? Are you cold?" Ben offers.

It would be nice to curl up in his warmth like that. But not this time. Bev feels good. She shakes her head. "Do you feel it?" she asks.

"Oh, I feel something." Mike starts the truck. "Dunno if it's good or bad, though."

"Stan's here," Bev says. "I saw him. He was in the courtroom, he was in Richie's glasses, and he was in the window outside."

Mike pauses before he releases the parking brake. "Is he here?"

Bev sits up straight so she can see into the rearview mirror. Then she checks the side mirror she can see, leaning around Ben. There's nothing. "I don't think so. But if we all go back to the Townhouse, I

just know he'll be there." She doesn't know what Richie wants to do, what kind of ritual he thinks they should perform in lieu of the smokehouse or of the Ritual of Chüd, but there are mirrors there, and if Stan will be there, it will be right.

Mike pulls out of the parking garage and the rain comes down on the windshield in a sheet. "Whoa," he says.

Ben takes Bev's hand again. She looks around at him, aware that the wild excitement burning inside her must be showing in her face. She doesn't need coddling in this moment, but, from the grim set to Ben's mouth and eyes—she realizes he's asking for her.

"It'll be all right," she whispers to him. The rain is loud enough that maybe Mike didn't hear it, and he's distracted by driving anyway, but if he did, he's the sort to keep quiet about it. Ben watches her mouth as she speaks, and it's not in a sexy way but in a sort of tired way. She tightens her hand on his. "It'll be all right." And then, because it feels right, "I love you."

Ben's mouth stretches into a smile, tight and quick. "I love you too," he says.

They drive home. Not to the place, but to the people.

6. Out of the Mockingbird's Throat

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben watches a bad seance. Bev hears some old tracks.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh holy shit, guys, this is an intense chapter. All the content warnings. All of them. Read them, I am not joking.

Content warnings, in order of appearance (not in order of intensity, this is very stressful): The Losers discuss canonical violence that happened both in the films and in the books, Ben is very tense, Ben speculates on domestic abuse that Bev might have experienced, murder, canonical bullying that happened to Ben, internalized fatphobia, Ben definitely has some kind of post-traumatic stress and he regresses a little in this chapter, Richie vomits again, Ben continues to compartmentalize his issues past a healthy point, Bev has flashbacks of domestic abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse. Uh, Stephen King says some pretty weird stuff about women's nipples in IT and I kind of do the same thing in this chapter, but I hope not as fucking weird as his. Bev has flashbacks of child sexual abuse, of marital rape, and of infidelity. There's a lot of blood and comparisons to menstruation, so if vaginas squick you out/trigger dysphoria, this is gonna be rough. A lot of Tom's dialogue and the voice Bev hears is taken directly from the book and the films, almost all of it, because it's really disgusting and I didn't want to put myself in Tom's head like I put myself in Myra's.

I would normally put such a detailed content warning in the end notes, but this isn't like, a fun plot advancement and not wanting to spoil that the

protagonists have sex, this is serious and very upsetting to the characters; if you want to skip the whole thing than jump to the end notes and I'll give a brief rundown so you can carry on to the next chapter when things have calmed down a little bit if you'd prefer. The whole thing is--very canon-typical, actually, it's the kind of thing It would do to Bev in the books, but PLEASE be careful.

Bev is not afraid.

That's what's getting Ben through this; the fact that Bev is not afraid. People spill into the room and it feels so much smaller now than when they all were sharing it. Ben glances at the made bed and Bev's open suitcase, wondering if he should close it for modesty's sake.

But Bev seems unconcerned; she's perching on the end of the bed and glancing into the mirror, and when she looks back at Ben her eyes are sparkling.

Right.

Right. Ben sits down so that if she wants to she could grab hold of him, put her feet on his shoulders, whatever she wants. Eddie hops up on the bed next to her, looking dour.

Richie sits between the bed and the bathroom door, rubbing his hands together. "So so so so."

This activates something deep in Ben's brain. Did they... did they all play board games together when they were kids? Something like that? It was the end of the 80s, the Satanic Panic, and Ben doesn't know what his mother would have done if he came home talking about playing Dungeons and Dragons or something, but... He frowns. He remembers a board game spread out on a table in front of them, and Bev telling everyone to shush because she had to call home on the landline. And then Ben... thought about something. Got lost in a flight of fancy, and Bill Denbrough was shaking him by the shoulder saying, *Ben? Ben?*

Bill sits down between Ben and Richie. Ben could reach out and

shake him by the shoulder, say, *I don't know about this*, but he won't. He glances back up at Bev, who is peering into the mirror again.

Stanley won, Ben remembers suddenly. Whatever they were playing, Stanley won.

Richie says, "Who dreamed, as soon as we were out of this room?" Technically Ben and Bev never left this room, but his point stands. He looks around, belligerent as when he was standing in the clubhouse mimicking Pennywise's dance. "Huh?"

"I did," says Bill.

Ben is kind of relieved that Bill started. He's sat through a lot of corporate meetings, especially before he got the kind of clout to interrupt and sigh and tell people that their designs looked like prisons. It's a relief to have someone in control of the meeting, and of course it has to be Bill. Ben's a little afraid of what a meeting led by Richie would end up looking like.

Is this a meeting? It definitely feels official.

"I was on the plane. I dreamed—" Bill blinks twice. His eyelashes are black, not like Bev's, and his eyes are very sharply blue. "I don't think it was It, or a memory. It was—something that didn't happen. That I hope isn't going to happen. But it felt... familiar."

Little shivers run up Ben's shoulders. He looks around at Bev, but she's not touching him. She looks back at him.

Ben mouths, *Stan?*

Bev nods.

Ben mouths, *Where?* He wouldn't be surprised if there's a ghost standing just behind him.

Bev points between Mike and Richie.

Huh.

So Ben has no excuse.

“Sharing is caring, and my trial’s over,” Richie says, heedless of the dead sitting beside him. “Cough it up, Hanlon.”

Mike gives his token protest, leaning forward and narrowing his eyes. “What did you dream?” he challenges.

To his credit, Richie doesn’t withhold. “I dreamed of blood coming out of the fortune cookies. and Bill was bald—” Bill’s face twists in something between incredulity and indignation, reaching up and touching his hair. “—and Bev had miles of Rapunzel hair, and Eddie was a blond and wearing my glasses, and the turtle spoke to me. Well, not a turtle, *the Turtle*. ”

Ben doesn’t know why he can hear the proper noun the second time he says it, but he does. The words touch something deeper in his brain than his standard auditory processing—somewhere in the space where he’s remembering... what were they doing that day? When did they have time, all that summer, just to play around?

Well, in the quarry. Bev showing up with her newly-cropped hair and stripping out of her clothes and leaping from the cliff. And Richie screaming *What the fuck?* almost in slow motion as she went.

“Now you,” Richie presses.

Eddie murmurs, “Careful, Richie.”

Mike opens his mouth and for a moment Ben thinks he isn’t going to speak. He wants to interrupt, to say *You don’t have to*, but then Mike is talking. “Bowers got me. It was night, for some reason. And you weren’t there. He stabbed me in the leg.” Mike draws in a deep breath and offers a smile that falls so far short of reassuring it’s a technical foul. “Stabbed me in the leg,” he repeats. “I had to make a tourniquet, and I had to get on the phone, but Pennywise was on the line. He wouldn’t—” He pauses again; Ben hates watching him struggle through it. “—wouldn’t allow me to hear anyone else.”

Ben thinks about allowances and perceptions. That first time he saw the clown—before it turned into the mummy—it was holding a balloon. The wind was storming, it was such a bad snowstorm the teacher didn’t want to let him walk home by himself, almost called

her husband to ask him to drop Ben off at home (and that would not fly today, in 2016, but in the winter of 1989, it was pretty sweet), but the balloon did not bend with the wind. It existed outside of time and space, outside of the rules of physics, and it got to change what they see.

But only Bev can see Stanley. And maybe—maybe—Bill.

Ben trusts them, but he doesn't know if it's the safest thing to do for any of them. As a kid, Ben spent so long staring at the balloon, trying to work out why it wouldn't blow in the wind on its string, that by the time he looked at what was holding it the clown was almost upon him, had turned into a mummy.

There's a lesson in there, Ben thinks. If he spends all his time worrying and wondering about the how and why, he might miss the real danger.

"I dreamed," Bev says softly. She doesn't sound *defeated* like she did in the bar at the Townhouse, when Ben begged her to talk to him and she let herself behind the bar and set the whole precedent for their occupation of this building. "I was running through Derry." Not as distraught as when she threw herself down in the chair and admitted she'd seen them all die. "And something was chasing me. It was chasing me, but not as Pennywise or anything I'd ever seen before. I had to climb under a Dumpster to get away, and when It finally gave up—*Bowers got me.*"

She puts one hand up and scrapes along the nape of her neck, her hair shaking out. It's not quite wet from the rain earlier, but it is curling there, flipping away from the back of her neck. Ben likes seeing her like that, he realizes—her court clothes are very nice and very polished, but it's almost like she's breaking though the veneer of elegance. The Bev on the inside is the Bev who wields the slingshot.

"Something that happened, or something that didn't?" Richie asks, his voice delicate and his words bland enough.

"Something that didn't. I cut my hair, that summer. There was nothing to grab." Ben makes the connection between *Bowers got me* from her lips and the reach toward her hair. He doesn't know why

Richie would dream Bev with long hair—*Rapunzel hair*—and while she'd look beautiful, Bev with the slingshot had the 80s curls. Bev with the piece of ornamental fencing in her hand, turning it into a javelin and smashing a mirror, has the bob.

Does her husband grab her by her hair? Ben thinks, and then has no idea where that came from. Or why he thought *does*, since regardless of the answer the man will never do it again. He won't tell Bev where to go, but if Ben ever thinks she's in danger from her husband again. Well.

It's an ugly thought. But Richie killed for Mike, without hesitation. And Ben doesn't know what he thought he was going to do, when Eddie wheezed *Bowers is in my room* and Ben bolted after him. But when Bowers turned around sneered up at the window, knife in hand.

Yeah, Ben could have killed him. It was strange to discover he had that capacity within him, but he found it. For something human, or loosely human, not just for a monster. Ben doesn't want that. He wants to be a protector, he wants to take care of people, he doesn't want to be... that. But he would.

The depth of what he would do, not just for Beverly, but for any of them, startles him all at once.

Richie points at Bill. “Something that didn’t happen.” Himself. “Something that didn’t happen.” Mike. “Didn’t.” He passes right over Ben and at Bev, and Ben knows what’s coming but that doesn’t mean he likes it. “Didn’t happen. Not memories. Something else.”

And Richie may annoy the shit out of Ben sometimes, but he killed Bowers for Mike, not even knowing what had happened in the Townhouse bathroom that Ben couldn’t stop. So Ben knows that he feels it too. The thing that ties them together.

Richie's pointing finger rests on Ben.

Ben looks down. At this distance he can't see Richie's fingerprint, but he imagines he can, for a moment.

He tries to keep his tone flat—to not go back into that space where the whole world trembled when he hit the linoleum, the way his bare skin squeaked in a way audible over the screams of laughter and jeering. “One time, my high school gym teacher told me I wasn’t getting bullied because I was fat.” Richie’s face changes not at all. Ben continues. “He said I was getting bullied because I was fat *in my mind.*”

All those sit-ups, Pennywise jeered while Ben was starting to suffocate, trying to climb his way out. *And you’re still just a little fat boy.* And then he closed the door to Ben’s own clubhouse, the one he had reinforced with his own hands and laid the sod over to hide them, and no one would ever find him—

“I love you as much as the next guy here, *Haystack*,” Richie says, not unkindly, “but you were fat in real life, too.”

It’s kind of a relief to hear him say it like that, not like his mother saying *No, you’re just big-boned, and one day you’ll go through a growth spurt*—and sure, Ben went through the growth spurt, but the fat didn’t go away when he suddenly shot up over six feet, it went away when he started running, when he stopped giving his body the things that it wanted and instead fed it on spite and undressed salad and he started running.

“Yeah, I fucking know,” Ben says. Richie called him *Haystack Calhoun*, and Ben liked that, in a way, even as it was annoying—*Haystack Calhoun* was cool. It was almost like this four-eyed motormouth was calling Ben *cool*—which Ben could deal with a lot better back in the day than he can deal with this four-eyed motormouth calling him *gorgeous* now. He shakes his head, trying to clear it. “That guy. That’s how I lost the weight, eating salads and running to beat that fucking guy’s track team, because fuck him.”

That’s not true, though. Ben was running towards something—Bev, Bev, Beverly said *I want to run towards something* but he can’t remember when he heard her say it—and that was spite and a confrontation with a man who hated him and would continue hating him no matter what Ben did, because he’d seen Ben naked in a hallway and covered in his own snot and tears (which again, would not fly in 2016). But Ben was running away from something too. The

way his skin slapped and burned against the linoleum, and *bounced* because of the fat.

And that guy was honest, in a way. Because fuck what he thought was going on in Ben's mind—he had seen Ben once, and gotten the measure of him then—*the measure*—and nothing Ben could do would change his mind.

And Ben hated him for that.

“Hear hear,” Bill says. He raises an imaginary toast.

Ben blinks, suddenly back in this room instead of stewing in his brain. “That’s what I dreamed. A memory. Something that actually happened,” he says. Maybe he can’t connect it to Bev’s dreams of the Losers dying—in ways, Mike says, they would be unlikely to commit—but he sees the line Richie’s chasing. It’s just unfortunate that Ben’s the outlier here. “What’s your point?”

Richie turns to look at Eddie. They stare at each other for a long moment.

“Actually happened,” Eddie says.

Richie averts his gaze and drums on the floor. “Fine,” he says. He blinks for several moments. He needs to clean his glasses. “I think Stan’s talking to me.”

Nobody says anything.

Ben looks over his shoulder at Bev, who looks stunned.

Then Bill nods. “What happened?” he asks.

Richie begins to fidget, pulling at his lower lip. “The turtle couldn’t help us,” he says. And then he starts doing something very strange. “The turtle couldn’t help us, I wrote you a letter. No, Richie! She’s not hot!”

Ben remembers that one.

Richie’s voice climbs in pitch, wavering like a singer seeking a note.

Ben is reminded of taping down his pages, of slotting his ruler into place, of being almost there—and then finding a line he mis-measured, and having to scrap the whole thing, the frustration and the sigh. Richie's *workshopping*, he realizes. Trying to find the right place to speak from.

"You left me," he moans in a child's voice.

Bev flinches. Ben reaches up and puts his hand over the top of her foot where it's exposed out of her shoe. It's creepy.

"You left me. You took me to Neibolt."

Ben remembers that one too.

"I hate you," Richie says flatly, still staring down at the floor. It's not the voice of the Irish cop, come bursting out of him and echoing across the cavern in the fight. That seemed effortless—that startled Ben not only with its volume and its ridiculousness—the sheer audacity—but with the idea that Richie had that in him.

Richie smiles at the floor suddenly, his head bobbing slightly, and then he continues. "The turtle couldn't help us, I wrote you a letter, I don't, I don't feel like a man, I'm a loser." His voice goes lower, the flat and grating quality of it shifting, deepening. "I know I'm a loser. I'm a loser, and I always fucking will be—" And the last vowel there cuts off, sown short, and a completely different voice says, "*Thanks for showing up, Richie.*"

Everyone goes tense, Richie included. Ben saw his mouth move, saw him groping for the right words and the right sound. He yelled at himself once already, but this isn't a quote, or if it is, it's not one that Ben knows. He remembers what Stan sounded like, frustrated and scared. Ben doesn't know this voice. He wonders if Mike does. Mike called them all.

Richie slaps his right hand to his mouth and his left arm across his body. He convulses once.

"Whoa!" Ben says with the rest of them, and then he's twisting around and searching. "Trash can, trash can." But the trash can has

used condoms in it, *fuck, no one works at this goddamn hotel.*

There's a great shift behind Ben. He turns back around to see that Bill Denbrough, six inches shorter than Richie, has grabbed Richie by the collar and dragged him up and is now hauling him to the bathroom. Ben automatically scrambles up to his knees, intending to follow—and a hand pushes into his chest.

"Move," Eddie says without looking at him, and storms across the circle after them.

There is the sound of retching from the bathroom.

Ben winces. His chest aches a little where Eddie shoved him, but it was so obviously nothing to do with Ben that it's hard to feel sore about it. He looks up at Bev.

Bev has her fingertips to her mouth, her pinkie resting on her bottom lip like she might start chewing her nails. "Jesus," she says, and lowers her hands.

The sink starts running.

There is the sound of Richie being sick, and trying to speak despite being sick, and Bill telling him that it's okay, and the sounds of wet fabric being tossed around. Mike slowly creeps over toward the doorway and peers in.

Ben turns to Bev and whispers, "What did you see?"

Bev shakes her head.

"That was Stan," Mike says, answering Ben's question without him having to ask. "I spoke to him on the phone, that was his voice."

"It shouldn't work like that," Bev whispers. She raises her voice slightly. "That's not how it works, is it, Richie?"

Eddie's voice comes out of the bathroom, flat and matter-of-fact. "It does if you believe it does. You know that, Bev."

What is *it* and how does it work?

“Did you see it?” Ben asks Bev. He doesn’t need the details, he just needs to know that this isn’t some kind of trick, that Richie’s head isn’t about to burst into flame.

Bev nods. “Is it still you in there, Rich?” he asks. “Did it go—did he go away?”

Right. They’re asking about their friend, not about a monster.

Ben can’t see Richie, so for all he knows a completely unknown and unseen person in the bathroom says, “Is this what you do now? Do you just puke all the time? Is this you?” And then there’s more retching.

“Shit,” says Bill.

It’s hurting him. Ben knows that Richie wanted to do this, that Bev was excited, but this is hurting him—it’s like the clown with the balloon, getting closer and closer while Ben tried to solve the mystery—and Richie is so ready to do things that are not good for him, without a second thought—that’s the danger, of the way he went to Mike’s defense, if he’ll do it for Mike he’ll do it for Stan, and this is going to have consequences.

“Eddie,” says the voice.

“Yeah?” Eddie’s voice is much gentler this time.

“Eddie.” There’s a pause and then the voice says, “She didn’t really burn it. *Shit*, don’t do that.”

It sounds like Richie interrupts himself, his voice thin and weak from vomiting. “Hey, if you don’t like it, pick another body.”

Ben covers his face with both hands; he feels like he’s listening to Norman Bates arguing with his mother in the next room. “Am I watching Psycho?”

“Fuck off, Haystack,” Richie says, which is fair, because Ben didn’t mean to say that out loud, but come on. Come on! It’s definitely Richie.

But the next time is the voice. “But I wrote the same thing to all of you. I meant it. The blood oath.”

“Stanley,” Mike says. His voice is breathy with relief.

If this is something that they all want—Bev wanted to mess with the magic, she was so excited about it, and Mike—Mike must have been the last person to talk to Stanley, Ben didn’t think about that, he only thought of Bev on the phone with Stan’s widow—he’s afraid of what it means that they’re all getting what they want, and that Richie so obviously cannot sustain this. Are they going to burn right through Richie? Stan is dead, are they going to burn right through Richie too?

All those sit-ups, Pennywise said. They killed the clown, and that was supposed to be the end of it, and what does it mean that Bev can see Stanley? Bev says he didn’t frighten her, but she cried both times she spoke of him, she talked about him bleeding...

“You fulfilled it, man.” Mike means the blood oath. “You’re here.”

“Yeah, well, this is worse,” the voice says. “It’s the blood oath, or I would never have been able to get back, and I had to do that, had to make you all swear to me, because I had to know you would come back even if I didn’t. I put you between me and It, guys, and I’m sorry for that.”

Then the whole room lights up from the window, and there’s a bone-shaking crack of thunder. Ben’s heart thumps in his chest, like it’s not convinced it’ll finish its quota of beats unless it works overtime now. They killed the clown, and it’s supposed to be over. This is all supposed to be over. And Ben no longer wants to be between anyone and It—

He swung his head, and the flashlight started to die, and he had to go on stomping.

“We forgive you,” Bill says quietly.

“Well, I don’t, and not just for making me—” Richie starts.

The voice interrupts. “*Beep beep, Rich, there’s no fucking time.*”

Ben stands up.

“Time for what, Stan?”

“Get out,” says the voice. “I’m putting me between you and It this time, guys, but I can’t hold it for long, you have to get out—”

And then Richie vomits again. There’s splattering—how can Richie have anything left in his body? If Ben looks into the bathroom is he going to see Richie choking up blood?

“We killed It,” he hears himself say, his voice small and childlike—the voice of the little boy chased in the library. He put himself back in that library—he walked through that library and he turned it on its side and he made that his communications tower, he will never stop being chased by what he saw in that library. “We killed It—didn’t we kill It, Stan?” He’s desperate to hear an answer, he’ll call this presence by his friend’s name if it means he gets an answer. “Didn’t we?”

There’s the sound of flesh striking tile—fat on linoleum.

The voice sounds like a horror movie, trying to speak despite Richie’s continued vomiting. It’s the voice of a demon in a movie, of the possessed, of something in an exorcism dying and leaving its last curse. “—out,” Richie’s body says, “—get out, get out, run.”

And then everything goes quiet.

Ben turns to look at Bev, who is frightened now. She’s frightened. Her eyes are big and pale green—*they were blue once*—

Okay. Okay. Get Bev out. That’s step one. Ben throws himself down and starts tucking the ends of her clothes into her suitcase, making sure that sleeves and tags are held within the boundaries of the zippers.

“Mike, can you get his other side?” Bill says. “Right, r-r-right.” So Bill’s scared too, and then he confirms it. “We’re running, it’s bad. Mike, we gotta get him out of here.”

“Put him in my car,” Eddie says. “Put him in my car, I’ll get his

stuff.”

“Where are we going?” Bev asks. She’s still on the end of the bed. She hasn’t reacted to Ben’s frankly intrusive packing for her, he knows he’s overstepped, but Ben doesn’t care what he walks out of here with so long as he leaves with her.

“The airport,” Eddie says with certainty. “We have to go to the airport. Take his car again.”

Ben gets up and walks across the room to grab Richie’s keys from the nightstand where Bev left them. He will put Bev’s suitcase in Richie’s car; he will drive her to the airport. That’s a plan of escape. “Are we all going to the airport?” he asks. “Are we going somewhere specific from there, or are we all going home?”

Bev flinches when he says *home* and he’s sorry. He’ll make her a home anywhere she wants.

“We need to leave together,” Eddie says; it’s as though since Richie has—definitely passed out now, Ben’s guessing—they’re taking his word as the authority. Eddie Kaspbrak is as convincing as Bill Denbrough, as convincing as he was in the dark screaming when he hurt It, Eddie Kaspbrak is tough, Eddie Kaspbrak is sensible. “We need to leave together, because if we split up to leave town—”

Bill agrees, “We’re weak.” Ben feels it. “And we don’t know what Stan’s doing to hold It off.”

This was all supposed to be over. Ben fucked it up, he’s certain now; he left an egg there, a body lying around, and It stepped into that body and then It stepped into Richie’s.

“I thought we killed it,” he says, almost pleading. He doesn’t like how shaky it comes out. “We were right there, it didn’t happen like this last time.”

They walked out believing they had killed it, that they were brave and strong and triumphant, and they were stronger in those days, but they didn’t know how weak they were, and if they couldn’t defeat It then how could they have thought they managed it this time, when

they are so much weaker? When they can all feel how much weaker they are?

“Even if we didn’t kill It, It’s supposed to rest for twenty-seven years between—sounders,” Mike says. He sounds frantic for an explanation. “We’ll be seventy before we know, if we even remember.”

“I believe in Stan,” Eddie says, as if that makes even a little bit of difference.

“Eddie’s right,” Bill says, nonsensically. “We can figure out what it is later, we just need to do what he says now.”

And that’s almost right—but it’s not that they need to do what Stan says, it’s that they need to get the fuck out of Derry, they need to stop looking at the balloon and just run.

“How,” Bev says softly. She coughs. “How do we know it’s Stan?”

Ben feels his arms fall and almost loses his grip on the keys. He has to clench his fist to keep from dropping them. It’s what he was thinking, but he didn’t expect to hear it from her. She was so certain when they started—she was *so certain*—and now Ben feels like she’s flinching away from him again, and he’s looking at the bruises on her wrists.

“It’s not the first time—not the first time that It’s appeared as one of us,” she says, and Ben’s face *burns*.

“Too late,” Bill says. “Can’t take the risk.” Which is true, they need to go. “Ben, you close the bills. If you need help, you can take my card—it’s in my wallet, Eddie, can you...”

“I won’t need it, I got it,” Ben says. He looks to Bev, but Bev is standing now and facing the bathroom, ready to receive orders from General Denbrough.

“Bev, take his car,” Bill says.

Ben hands her the keys. He grabs clothes and throws them in his bag, then zips it up—if there’s anything else of his in the room, he doesn’t really need it, and he’s certain some of his belongings ended up in Bev’s suitcase anyway.

There's muttering about keys from the next room and at some point Eddie says, "That son of a bitch" almost in an undertone, but Ben's not clear on who he means and his head is spinning.

Bill and Mike walk Richie out of the bathroom—he is unconscious—and through the room. Ben puts his backpack over his shoulder and makes to go open the door, but Eddie is striding ahead of them without even looking around, like no one else is there, and sure, Ben will let that happen, that's fine, Ben just needs to worry about Bev—

Bev is white-faced but she's determined, zipping up her bag.

Bill and Mike clear the doorway.

Ben holds his hand out for her suitcase. "Do you want me to take that?" And maybe it's less of a question, more of a *please let me take that*, but they're not just leaving, they're *evacuating*.

"The toothbrushes," Bev says, and whips into the bathroom. She comes back out with a handful of stuff that she crams into the suitcase and zips over it. Ben will buy replacements for literally anything she wants once they're the hell out of Derry.

Ben takes her bag and goes down the stairs so fast for a moment he's concerned he's going to go right through the banister at the bottom—*inertia, fat boy*—but he turns and—

There's someone at the check-out desk.

Ben braces himself there, keeping Bev's suitcase upright with one hand. "Hi," he says. "All of us would like to leave, please. I'll be paying everyone's tabs."

The woman behind the counter looks startled. "Is he okay?" she asks.

Ben looks over his shoulder, expecting that question to be about him and directed toward Bev or something, but Mike and Bill are guiding Richie down the steps toward the front door. *Shit.*

"He's not feeling well," Ben says, "and he has to leave to seek medical help, so I'm going to pay for his room, okay?"

She blinks. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” Ben says, too quickly to be polite.

“I could call an ambulance,” she says.

At which point Bev comes down the stairs. She’s carrying her heels in her hand, just in her socks on the carpeted steps, and she slips. Ben turns automatically, reaching out for her, but she steadies herself and straightens up.

“I’m fine, honey,” she says to him. She comes up beside him and Ben makes himself let go of her suitcase. Then she’s sliding his backpack off his shoulder. She stands up on her toes to kiss him, and says, “I’ll meet you in the car?”

“Yes,” he says. He turns back to the woman behind the counter. “All three tabs, please. Hers, mine, and, uh, that guy’s.”

He pays the three tabs. The sum makes the woman’s eyes widen when she says it out loud, and then she says, “There must be a mistake, wait...”

“It’s fine,” Ben interrupts. He hands her his black card. “It’s right. Just run it.”

By the time he comes back out into the rain, he can see Bev sitting in the driver’s seat of Richie’s car. The water has gathered on the asphalt into kind of a silver haze around the wheels. He’s relieved she feels up to driving, in a way; he knows his hands are shaking.

Mike is walking across the parking lot to his truck; Bill and Eddie are still standing beside Eddie’s Cadillac. The passenger door is open and Richie is leaning out, conscious once more.

Ben intercepts Mike. He puts his hand on the side of the vehicle to brace himself and says, “Mike, do you have the—do you still want to...?” He’s breathing too fast.

Mike looks alarmed. “Are you okay, man?”

“Yeah, I want to go,” he says.

“Take a breath. Bev’s driving?”

“Bev’s driving,” he confirms. Ben stomped around in the dark but who knows what kind of job he did, in the end, anyway?

“Yes, I brought the title, you can just give me a dollar.”

“Hang onto it,” Ben says, “until we get to the airport. Then you won’t have to worry about the car when you go.”

“Okay,” Mike says.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” Mike says. “You should go sit down, man. It’s gonna be okay.”

There’s rain sluicing down the back of Ben’s neck.

“Okay,” he says, and walks over to Richie’s rental car. He puts his hand on the passenger side door, takes a deep breath, and slides in. He does not slam the door behind him; he closes it carefully, and then he buckles his seatbelt slow enough that his hands are relatively steady.

“Are you ready?” Bev asks.

Ben nods and pushes his hair out of his face. “Yes,” he says.

They wave at Bill and Richie, still hanging out of Eddie’s car, as they drive out of the parking lot. Ben leans back against the seat and feels his heart rate slowing down because it has to. It has to.

They return Richie’s rental car.

They say goodbye.

Ben is quiet as ever and Bev is steadying now that Richie’s up and functional and definitely himself.

“This won’t be the last time,” she says. “I won’t let it be the last time.

You're all coming to see us again, at some point. Maybe we can meet you on your roadtrip?"

Mike says, "I'll never say no to that."

There's an exchange of hugs.

"Be proud," Richie says in a voice not his own. "Be who you are."

And all of them step back at once, in mute silent agreement, so that no one has to be the first to let go.

Bev falls asleep in the car.

She didn't expect to—at some point on the drive to the airport, she stopped being frightened and instead fell into that quiet certainty with which she rushed at the mirror with the javelin over her head, not sure what she would accomplish but certain that it was better than doing nothing. But that level of control is hard to sustain, it's hard on the body.

Ben got in the driver's seat at the airport and she didn't mind that. She could already hear her heart slowing down, and at first she thought it was just calm. But as the sun set—it was mostly dark by the time they left the short-term parking garage—and the rain continued to drum on the hood of the car, and the roof, and the truck bed in the back, she realized that her heart was slowing because she was falling asleep.

Ben's backpack is not waterproof, but he doesn't seem to care. They haven't been doing laundry while they've been at the Townhouse—one day Ben walked off with a bunch of her clothes and came back hours later with everything folded and wrapped in a plastic bag, and Bev checked the tags and realized he'd only taken the machine washable clothes she'd already worn. He asked her if it was okay, when he handed her a stack of clean clothes. He clearly hadn't washed them himself, but Bev didn't think she could go back to that laundromat. And even though he hadn't asked—it was a real relief. Tom would never have thought of that. He would never have thought

to take care of her clothes for her, and he certainly would not have checked to see if anything might be destroyed in a washing machine or a dryer. “Of course it’s okay,” she told him, and he smiled that apple-smile, so happy that she was happy with him.

God.

There was no question about going with him. No question at all. After the scare back in the hotel room it feels like a completely different world, this truck cab in the dark in the rain. She trusts him to drive her—he never sighs or complains about other drivers, he stays mostly in the right lane and only passes with great deliberation. He’s so careful with her. Bev could fall asleep knowing that Ben Hanscom was in charge of the nuclear launch codes, and that she’d be safe, safe, *safe*.

The air smells like him, and the abstract warmth of the cab—a sweet smell she identifies as *Mike* and *time* and *comfort*.

Tom would have a lot to say about this truck. Tom would never expect her to fit in this truck—he calls her *milady* when he thinks she’s being uppity, which is usually when he’s cracking into his second six-pack during the game and she’s stupid enough to say, *Oh, Tom*, when she sees it, *my fucking lady*—Tom would never expect her to sit in this truck, would never expect her to be in a truck with Ben Hanscom, will never find her. Little locks opening up inside Bev’s chest; a dress tight enough to fit but not enough to be comfortable, and taking it off at the end of the night. Her whole life behind her.

Are you sure about that, Bevvie? Are you sure?

Ben has the air cycling so that the windows don’t fog up. It’s comfortable; she can feel the air blowing gently, mostly in the way that her hair wisps against her forehead occasionally. Maybe she’ll cut her hair again. Just cut it very short, a way of sloughing off all the dead parts of her that ever touched Tom, that Tom ever touched. Maybe she’ll go to a spa and be exfoliated all over her body, and have a manicure done, and have her toenail polish sanded off and repainted on smooth and clean.

She smiles in her sleep at the idea; she has no money besides what

Ben is willing to give to her, and Ben's willing to give her anything, so she'd better be careful about what she asks for. Kay would go with her to a spa, she thinks. Someday, when she sees Kay again, maybe they'll go to a spa, and get massages, and talk about something that they both enjoy picking over for once. Nothing that makes Bev anxious and ashamed, and no bruises to hide, and Kay won't get frustrated about what Bev isn't saying.

It feels safe in this small space. Like anything could happen. The world outside is no obstacle, there's just the rain and she's warm and dry in here, and Ben is here, and they have nothing but possibility ahead of them, it's like...

Some kind of egg.

She ought to wake up and talk to him, or navigate, or play DJ like they did before their date—not New Kids right now, but she could go for some Tracy Chapman, she can always go for some Tracy Chapman—but she feels too heavy and comfortable to move. Breakfast was really good. She's still thinking about that eggs benedict, the way she bit into picked onion and enjoyed it, the color, the way Ben let her feed him off her fork and only blushed a little bit.

Tom used to belt her over dinner. Not actually during dinner—it was always either immediately before or after dinner, depending on whether it wasn't ready by the time he got home or whether Bev had started too early and it was cold. He belted her across the breasts. He took the buckle off it, after the tongue of the metal didn't just give her a welt, it broke her skin, and ever since then Bev hasn't liked having her nipples touched—he never pulled, he never bit, but she felt like she had two targets on her chest.

Ben was so careful. Heat pools in her body as she thinks of it. Didn't go straight for them—he made her put his hands on her, and then he just held her carefully, touched in a way that lifted the weight off her, and if that isn't Ben...

The monster in her old apartment said something—something about teeth—

Bev feels herself frown as she thinks of it, and Ben is driving so he's

watching the road. She tries to turn her head but she's too limp and boneless to move. Better think about something else.

Dinner. She doesn't know what she's going to do when they get to Ben's home in Nebraska—she's going to have things to do, lawyers to consult, discreet trips to make into Chicago, she's going to have to see Kay—but before that they will go to Ben's home, she will be safe. She doesn't know what to do to fill her days, exactly. If she told Ben she needed a mannequin, he'd buy her one. If she told him she needed to go look at fabrics he'd buy whatever she wanted, she's sure of it.

What will he let her do for him?

Tom said *Show me what you were gonna do with Mike*, and then he pulled his shirt over his head.

She doesn't want to think about that—she doesn't want to think about that, and she can see it because she's half-asleep and dreaming. She can practically hear Tom whispering it to her, *You don't have to explain yourself to me, milady doesn't have to explain herself to me, my fucking lady, you're gonna stay right here and you're gonna show me what you were gonna do with Mike*.

She tries to wrench her eyes open and—this is a nightmare. She's suddenly no longer comfortable and lazy, she's trapped in her body, and Tom is throwing her down and yanking his shirt over his head, but in the dark, she can't be sure it's Tom, it could be—

“Bevvie.”

She startles but her head doesn't move, her eyes don't open for more than a second—she can see, skewed across her vision, both the inside of the cab and Tom leaning over her. She's sitting upright on the bench seat, the bench seat she's sharing with Ben, and she's on her back on the end of the bed, and no, *no*—

She purses her lips, trying to form the *B* that will start Ben's name, that will make him talk to her and wake her up, but she can't get it out, she can't get past one letter, she sounds like Bill, sounds like Bill as a child—

She kissed him with her hands still bleeding fresh from where Stanley cut them all with the bit of coke bottle—Stanley stood in front of the mirror and he bled when she asked him about his wife, she pushed him back to his death—and he dripped blood on her face, which woke her up, but she can't wake up—and Bill had her blood smeared up along his jaw when she kissed him, it was her first kiss, it was sweet as sunlight, but suddenly the light is changing, it's turning blue inside, they're not children, and Bev is kissing Bill in the lobby of the Townhouse but Ben is *right beside her*, and Bev doesn't want to dream about kissing Bill, she doesn't want to remember how she hurt his wife, how they both hurt his wife, and for nothing—

Tom said she had *whore's hair*, he called her *a certain red-haired lady*, and Ben smiled at her as Bill was struggling to speak and said *Your hair is beautiful, Beverly*, and her father took her ponytail in his hand

Show me what you did with Ben, Bevvie. Show me what you did. Are you still my wife, you whore, Bevvie? Are you still my wife? Are you still —Daddy's—little—”

Bev screams, “No!” and jerks awake.

Ben is startled; he says, “Bev?”

And the tape deck, which they haven't touched, spits out a gout of blood.

Bev knows what it is as soon as she hears it, but the smell rises up in the cab, all metal and salt. It's the smell of removing a tampon, feeling that give inside, and the chlorinated water in a public bathroom and the sudden stink of blood in the air, and that's the *squelch* the tape deck gives, the sound of something sliding out of the clutch of Bev's body.

Ben says, “Fuck!” clearly shaken, and he glances toward her; Bev can see flashes of his white face in her peripheral vision, but she's staring at the blood belching out of the tape deck. She had a tape deck when she was a kid, she thinks, she remembers how it felt to open up the drawer for the tape and touch the plastic prongs where the tape would rest and turn—*two hard little peaks, like nipples*, says that

animal voice in her brain, but that's not right, they turned—and the way it felt to pinch her finger in trying to take a tape out and flip it to side B or back to side A to listen over again—did she have a Tracy Chapman tape? Did she record it from the radio in college? Blood. That's blood. The tape deck is bleeding.

The tape deck is bleeding.

Like waking up with your period and knowing you can't control how much blood there is, and sprinting to the bathroom—a man *whistled* at her, thirteen, standing in front of the display of sanitary napkins and knowing she was going to have to pick a box and bring it home to her father's house, that she couldn't sneak into the girls' bathroom with a quarter, she was going to have to put them in her underwear drawer or in her closet but he went into her underwear drawer, didn't he? He went into her underwear drawer and pulled out the postcard, the postcard that was Ben's, and she eventually hid it in the baseboard on the wall, and she couldn't hide an entire box of pads in the wall, and they would be filthy once she pulled them out even if she did, no matter their plastic wrapping, she would have to put that dirty cotton up against her skin and *bleed*—

The tape deck vomits another wave of blood. It sounds like a retch this time, like Richie getting sick in the bathtub, and the blood lands in hard drops on the floor, she can hear it even over the rain.

“Shit, Bev, it’s okay!” Ben is saying. “It’s okay! It stopped last time, it’s okay!”

But the tape deck is saying, “*Bevvie, Beverly, Beaverly, are you a slut? Are you a slut or a little shit? Are you a little slut child, running around with those boys, are you still—*”

“No!” Bev gets her leg up and kicks the tape deck hard, and it sprays blood across her. The hard plastic hurts her foot, aches across the heel in a long line that doesn't match where she struck it—and she realizes, slowly, that she left the Townhouse with her shoes in her hands and she left her house in Chicago with no shoes on at all, and bleeding from the heel where she stepped on broken glass, either a perfume bottle or bits of the mirror. She hasn't thought about the cut since, but she's sure it's open again now, it's not just the tape deck

bleeding, that smell is her blood in the air.

The tape deck only laughs when she kicks it—animal laugh, animal voice, animal—and spits more blood. “*Bevvie! Bevvie!*”

She leans forward and scrabbles for one of her sensible court heels.

The car is slowing; Ben is pulling over, and Bev shrieks, “No, don’t stop, we have to go! We have to leave!”

“*Nobody who dies in Derry ever really dies,*” says the voice of the old woman. “*Your fadder died in Derry, Beverly, Bevvie, and so he’s always with you, isn’t he? He’s always with you, you went out and found him again and you married him—*”

“Keep driving,” Bev tells Ben—she needs him to listen to her—and the tape deck vomits out more blood. She gets hold of her shoe and strikes it; there’s a crack of breaking plastic, and more blood, like she’s killing it, like she’s beating the tape deck to death like she killed her father. “Keep driving! Ben! Please! Keep driving!”

“Fuck,” Ben says, and puts on the hazard lights, and he lowers the speed, but he drives steadily, his shoulders hunching up. “It’s okay, Bev. It’s gonna be okay.”

“*Show me what you did with Ben, Bevvie. Show me what you did. How many times did you come? I thought you didn’t want to.*” The shame of it burns all the way down, coats her skin like blood. Ben’s sitting right next to her, he’s hearing this, she can’t. She strikes the tape deck again but it doesn’t stop the voice, the awful voice. “*I thought you didn’t want to. How many times did you come? You talk to Tom. You hear me, Bev? Talk to Papa.*”

She shrieks and beats the tape deck, wanting to smash it like the mirror, wanting to kill it like they killed that fucking clown, but nobody who dies in Derry ever really dies, and it’s here, it’s in the truck with them, It’s in the car with them.

“*How many times did you come? How many times? How many times?*”

Bev said, *You’re not supposed to ask that.*

Tom said, *No? Who told you that? Mister Rogers?*

Bev said, *You're not supposed to hit me. That's bad basis for a lasting relationship.*

Tom said, *You want to get out, Bev? I saw you reaching for the door handle, so I guess you must want to get out. Okay. That's all right. I asked you to do something and you said you would. Then you didn't. So you want to get out? Come on. Get out. What the fuck, right? Get out. You want to get out?*

Ben tried to stop the car, but Bev has to leave—she's leaving, she's leaving Derry, she's leaving Maine, and she's never coming back, so she doesn't want to get out, she doesn't want to get out, she wants to keep going, she wants to keep going with Ben.

“No, I don’t want to get out!” she screams at the tape deck, which spits more blood, and Tom said... Tom said...

What, those cigarettes giving you emphysema?

“*You been smoking,*” says the tape deck. “*You been smoking, you been playing with boys, Bevvie!*”

Bev looks to the side, at Ben’s wild and pained face, watching her fall apart, and a flash of dark eyes in the mirror, belonging to neither of them, but not blue and not yellow—dark, and knowing. And she remembers what Ben had shouted to her, as he was being crushed to death, as she was drowning in waves of blood just like this—

His poem.

Bev plunges her hand into the pocket of her neat suit skirt and dredges up the lighter. She flicks it open and shouts, “There! There’s your fucking January embers!”

The tape deck *screams*. It’s an incoherent wail, of pain.

The little flame erupts into a column that nearly reaches the ceiling of the cab; Ben swears and jerks to the left, but his hands on the wheel are steady and careful, Ben is so steady and so careful.

“There’s your winter fire!” Bev is scrabbling in her jacket pocket, she’s opening up the packet of cigarettes and whipping one out, jamming it into her mouth. As she brings the lighter close to her face the flame goes back to regular size, obedient, not wanting to hurt her —Ben would never hurt her—and the cherry of her cigarette swells as it catches. “I’ll show you what burns,” Bev says through the corner of her mouth, “I’ll show you what burns.”

And the tape deck is silent and still.

Bev pulls a drag on the cigarette and sighs through her nose—*I’m a dragon, I’m a train, I’m Beverly fucking Marsh*. The smoke fills the cab—the good smell, the relaxing smell—and overwrites the blood.

She becomes aware, slowly, that Ben is panting. Harder than he did after they had sex.

It’s over.

Bev reaches over and rolls down her window. “I’m sorry,” she says. The smoke seeps out of the cab and the rain washes it away, but she keeps the cigarette in her hand. “I’m sorry, I know.”

“I need to stop the car,” Ben says.

“Please,” Bev says. “Please don’t.” She’s sure that if they stop, she’ll never get out. “We have to keep going. Please, Ben, please keep going.”

“Okay,” Ben says. “Okay.” After a moment he reaches out with his left hand and rolls down his window, too, with the little manual one, and Bev remembers the little window out into the cab and looks up at the rearview, but Stanley’s eyes are no longer there.

She’s crying, though. Her court makeup is smeared around her eyes in little clouds (*like smoke*). She puts the cigarette to her lips and draws again, feeling not at all like a child. She breathes out. It comes out like mist, hot, in the cold wet air.

“I’m sorry,” she says again.

“Bev, don’t ever be sorry,” he says. “Don’t ever be sorry. Not with

me, not with anyone ever again. God.” He puts his hand over his mouth and then rests it back on the wheel.

She hates that he heard that, that he *knows*. “I love you,” she manages, but it’s a plea, trying to loop him back in. “I love you, I do.”

“I love you,” Ben says back, without the *too*, and it means more than way. It’s not part of a call and response, it’s its own declaration. “My whole life, I loved you, Beverly, even when I didn’t know who you were, even when I couldn’t remember you, I loved you. I kept—” He’s shaking. “I kept your name, and I couldn’t even read it—I looked at it, and I couldn’t read the words, I couldn’t read the name *Beverly Marsh*, but I saw the little hearts, and I knew someone drew me those little hearts, and it meant—” He tilts his head back; he’s blinking away tears but it’s not like it makes a difference in this rain. “—it meant I hadn’t always been like this, I hadn’t always been—”

He cuts himself off.

“What?” Bev asks, her voice soft and hushed on the smoke. She can’t imagine any word that describes Ben Hanscom being bad—he’s just the same as when he was young, he’s just the same, he’s so sweet, she loves him, loves him in a way that feels like uncovering sod and discovering a trap door, something that has always been there but hidden.

“Alone,” Ben says.

And Bev, who has cleaved to men her whole life, reaches out and puts her hand on his knee. She’d take his hand, but he’s driving. She slides sideways on the bench seat and presses up against his side, her cigarette hanging in her right hand and pointing toward the open window, blood spattered on the seat in front of them and on her blouse and his shirt. She puts her cheek against his shoulder.

Ben shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t—you just...”

“Shhh,” she tells him, because if she never has to apologize ever again neither does he.

He takes in a breath. “That’s how I love you, Beverly. Like a cornerstone.”

She hates herself for needing to hear it—*bad basis for a long-lasting relationship* rings in her ears, in her own voice but higher pitched and without resonance, as though it comes from outside herself. Ben would watch her kill a man—would watch her beat her husband to death—and he would never question what she dragged him into. He’d forgive her any of it.

This is dangerous, she thinks, this is very dangerous in a way that no man has ever been dangerous with you before. But maybe it is. Beverly is her father’s daughter (*daddy’s little girl*) and maybe there’s something growing up out of her too, a gnarled vine that twists and grasps, a lash coming out of a drain and snaring people. She’s the dangerous one now.

The danger is that she likes it.

“I love you,” she says. She doesn’t say *I’m sorry*.

Ben shakes his head. “I just meant—” He grimaces as he remembers the hazard lights and jabs them off, easily. “—you smoke all you want to, around me.”

She feels her face crumple.

He looks over his shoulder and says, “Shit, I’m sorry—”

“No,” Bev says, almost on a sob. She tucks her face into his jacket. “Keep driving. You’re doing... you’re good. We’re not alone.”

“Yes,” Ben says. He clears his throat, not like he’s dispelling the emotion but like he’s trying to keep speaking through it. “We’ll keep going. We’ll keep going.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay: during the disgusting seance (™), Ben is very stressed out at the possibility that this is not Stan speaking to them, but instead It. Ben also mentions an encounter he had with a teacher at his school, but

he recalls a very distinct moment of bullying that was extremely traumatic for him and does not share the details. When Richie begins vomiting and Stan tells them to get out, he becomes frantic in his goal to escape with Beverly, but he does not share any of his actual fears with her, and actually suppresses them.

AND immediately afterwards, on the drive, Bev has a dream. She goes from comfortable and happy to uncomfortable, remembering her marriage and Tom's abuse, and then has a flashback to an attempted marital rape. Then she wakes up, screaming, and the tape deck begins spitting blood into the cab. Ben tries to stop the car to drive safely, but Bev begs him to keep going. A voice from the tape deck bombards her with insults, especially relating to sexual abuse. Bev beats the tape deck with her shoe and lights a cigarette, reciting Ben's poem and using the lighter and the smoke to drive off the voice.

Ben is deeply disturbed by this display and tells Bev never to apologize to him again, and tries to reassure her by telling her he loves her, confessing that he remembered little of her even while he loved her but that her signature was a talisman for him, reminding him that there was a time when he was not lonely. Bev feels concerned that her relationship with Ben has reversed her typical relationships with men, and that instead she is in power with possibility of harming him.

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Okay, I think that's everything.

I'm sorry I missed my update yesterday, I had a bad day and I spent those two days mostly coping, cleaning my house, and reading [calamity-bean's canon divergent Reddie fic recs](#), on which I am honored to be included. Tomorrow is my 8 year

anniversary, or (checks watch) I guess it's later today, actually, so I might not get a Friday update out, and I think that's okay because I need to work out how Ben and Bev are going to recover from this chapter in particular. Logically I know what happens next, but Bev with the lighter was one of the scenes I knew was gonna be pivotal for this fic, so I gotta work out how to get up from this. I hope that I can offer these fic recs as something to keep you entertained in the meantime.

IF YOU FIND SOMETHING ELSE I NEED TO TAG FOR IN THE CONTENT WARNINGS, please PLEASE tell me in the comments. I'll edit it on my phone as soon as I get your message in my inbox, I promise, I'm not fucking around here. If you read through the whole thing, I'd like to thank you very sincerely for your trust in me and for reading my work.

7. Out of the Windy Night

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben and Bev talk about a lot of things. Guess who's coming for dinner?

Notes for the Chapter:

Whew! Please pardon the number of references in this one, and the things they may or may not reveal about my knowledge of art; I'm having a difficult time writing for these two sophisticated artists so I literally have them play Coke or Pepsi in this chapter.

Content warnings: Bev litters, Ben tries to stop automatic association from happening in flagrant disrespect for how the human brain works, a number of unattributed quotations, Tom assaulted Kay and she's not all right, discussion of domestic abuse and violence, mention of suicide (Stanley).

They make it over the New Hampshire state line.

Ben can't think about the smell of smoke and blood; just Bev leaned up against his side. She's there and she's awake but she's not *there*. At some point she tires of smoking and idly flicks her cigarette butt out the window (Ben needs to buy her ashtrays or something) and then she just presses her cheek against his bicep and gets quiet. Whenever he asks her if she's okay she just nods and makes a noncommittal sound, and Ben knows there's nothing less reassuring than someone repeatedly asking if you're okay, so he stops.

It is very frightening. Ben exists in a perpetual state of fear, as he drives, that she'll gasp awake shouting *No!* again and the tape deck will vomit another gout of blood into the cab.

But nothing happens, and she doesn't seem to be asleep, really, just in her own head. They make it across the state line; they pass the

Welcome to New Hampshire sign and suddenly the rain lightens, and then stops entirely.

Bev sits up when the weather calms. “Hmm,” she says.

“We need to decide when we’re stopping for the night,” Ben says.

Her gaze flickers a little; it’s hard to see in the dark, with her bright hair gone auburn and hanging around her face. “Are you good to drive?” she asks.

He has to be honest about that; he can’t risk her in the car. He does a systems check and, while he’s disturbed by the blood and Bev’s frantic attack on the tape deck—he used to see terrifying things every day. It’s like the memory is already rusting, some of its acuteness dying off.

“I can drive,” he says. He’s a damn good night driver. There was a year or two when he worked with a moving company, packing other people’s furniture into a long-haul truck and then taking it to the depot where the drivers would swap out, and he used to think that if he never got to make anything out of the structures in his brain, he could at least do that—drive moving trucks and unload them and see all the houses he’d never build. But it didn’t end up like that.

So they kept going.

Richie calls around one in the morning. Bev doesn’t brighten up exactly, but all her stillness and quiet suddenly goes taut, like she was lying in wait for something and only just spotted it. She puts the phone to her ear and asks, “You okay?” and Ben wants to kick himself for not thinking about Richie and Eddie.

Bev listens and says, “We’re okay. Blood just poured out of the tape deck, though.”

The blasé tone makes Ben blink a couple of times. It’s hard to juxtapose Houston-operator Bev against the panicked Bev he saw beating the tape deck with her shoe, but he thinks he understands her waiting now. She listened to him talk—far past what he should have said, when she was so freaked out—and then she waited, and now

Richie's calling.

"Yeah," she says. She looks at the road. "We're just about to pass into New York, though, and it stopped as soon as we were out of Maine, so now it's just..." She grimaces. "The smell."

Ben tries not to think of the smell. He can't afford to get conditioned to associate the smell of cigarettes with the smell of blood, not if Bev is going to continue smoking, and since it seems very important that she continue smoking, he tries to clamp down on that particular trauma response before it can form.

(*All those situps...*)

"We're not there yet, but we're about to pass in. You're only in New Hampshire?" Ben frowns, glancing at her again in the dark. "How?" Bev asks. There is a pause as Richie replies, and then Bev giggles.

All the tension goes out of Ben's body. Just evaporates out of him.
Thank you, Richie.

"Did you spit on Eddie? Did he leave you in New Hampshire? Is that why you're still there?" She smiles and Ben can see what she's imagining—Eddie Kaspbrak just imploding with rage and leaving Richie on the side of the road, or Richie apologetically following Eddie into a rest area despite Eddie trying to shut the door in his face. Bev's little smile wavers and a line appears between her brows, and then she says, "Like, eight?" And then, "No, that's not until November."

He wants to ask what they're talking about, but he's sure it has something to do with time and if she's distracted he's not going to interrupt.

"Are you okay?" she asks again, her tone less urgent and more serious this time. Then she takes a deep breath and asks, "Richie, what did you see?" She blinks and then holds the phone away from her head.

"Did he hang up on you?" Ben asks.

"Fucker hung up on me," Bev confirms, but her tone is warm and

understanding. She puts her phone back in her pocket. “They lost an hour. They only just got out of Maine. He said Eddie couldn’t see.”

Ben frowns, unsure what to make of that.

“But that Eddie put on his glasses and he could see all of a sudden.” She puts her fingers to her mouth again, that casual spread-handed gesture she makes when she wants a cigarette, and says, “I think none of us can get out of there alone.”

Oh.

The poem. The lighter. It felt weird to hear her cursing and reciting that poem—he’s a little mortified by that poem, to be honest, but he knows there’s something more in there than just his young lovestruck words—but she knew what to do. Ben just drove the car.

“Bill and Mike,” he says.

“Yeah,” says Bev. She lowers her hand to her pocket, thinking. “I could call them, but if they’re in the air, I won’t get them anyway.”

“Mike might be through already,” Ben says. He’s not completely sure how long it takes to fly from Bangor, Maine to Florida, but it has to be less than five hours, right? But he doesn’t know how long Mike had to wait at the gate for his flight.

And international flights are even less frequently scheduled; Bill will almost definitely have a connection somewhere, and it’ll take about twelve hours. They will have no answers from Bill tonight.

Bev shakes her head and says, “I can’t, tonight.”

And Ben understands that. The not-knowing is painful, but asking the question is almost as bad.

So Ben stops at the nearest hotel he thinks they won’t get murdered in—he’d love to give Bev something nicer, but the priority now is getting her out of the bloody truck. They pull into the parking lot and when the truck stops Bev sits up a little again. The night air runs cold fingers through the warmth she left on his clothes. Ben was a little afraid she was just going to keep reclining against him and he’d have

to lift her out. But she just watches him, a sleepy cast to her eyelids, as he slides out, and then she follows him out the driver's side door.

Her suitcase has a plastic shell on it, so it's limned in rainwater that flows off when he lifts it out of the truck bed. Ben swings his soaked backpack up onto his shoulder without a care, and the cold from that shocks him a little more awake, too.

The night manager looks at them with some concern when they come in. "Oh wow, caught in the rain?"

"Yep," Ben says. "And as soon as we decide to stop for the night, it stops."

He's aware of the spray of blood on his shirt, and on Bev's blouse under her suit jacket. It's rusting brown now.

"That's always the way it is," the night manager says. He gives no sign of having noticed any blood, just the rain, and maybe it's better this way. Nobody ever saw the blood when it was in Bev's bathroom. Nobody even questioned her stained shirt at the hospital, but maybe they thought it was all Eddie's.

Ben books the room. Bev loops her arm through his and leans on him, and when he glances down at her she gives him a sleepy smile. She looks tired and not traumatized—that's what the night manager sees—but Ben is wide awake with his radar cranked all the way up. He wheels Bev's suitcase into the elevator and they go up to the second floor.

It's a lot of going somewhere to be still, that's what it is. Bev says, "I hope the truck's okay."

Ben is trying to imagine stopping at a car wash and having people detail it, taking the gamble of whether or not the blood is invisible to everyone except them or if the night manager was just being polite. He doesn't think that's gonna happen. Not a risk he wants to take on this drive; and he doesn't think he can get a new car within the next two days, no questions asked. He doesn't carry around that kind of cash.

And if Bev says *I hope the truck's okay* that means she's attached to it, so Ben's just going to have to do what he can to fix the mess.

They step into their room and Bev sits on the end of the bed immediately, looking frazzled. They had an early day, with their shared anxiety about the trial—they thought it was going to end today, but they'd been thinking that for the last couple of days and were just kind of on red alert, waiting to see if Eddie and Bill would make it back in time. She looks tired, and her mascara and eyeliner are smudged around her orbital sockets.

“We should eat something,” Ben says. He’s not hungry, but he’s very aware that Bev hasn’t had anything to eat since lunch.

“I’m not hungry,” she says.

Cigarettes are an appetite suppressant, aren’t they?

He almost asks *Are you sure?* but she’s a grown woman. He says, “Okay. But if that changes, can you promise you’ll tell me? Like, even at four in the morning, I’ll see what I can do.” He might have granola bars or something in his backpack, and if the plastic casing is good they might even be edible, just enough to get them through until morning.

Bev smiles a tired smile. “Okay,” she says.

He becomes aware he’s hovering; he lays her suitcase down so she can go into it if she wants to, and then he crouches.

“What do you need?” he asks.

Her arms are drawn tight around her body, her hands tucked under the flaps of her jacket. She tucks her elbows a little closer and straightens up, hugging herself.

“I want to take a shower,” she says slowly. Her gaze turns toward the door. “But I don’t want to be alone.” She smiles again, a little sadly. “But I don’t want you to look at me, either.”

Ben immediately drops his gaze to the bedspread. There’s a purple and gold paisley pattern stretching across it.

She laughs. “No, you can look at me now, it’s fine. I just... don’t want to be seen naked, after that.”

That’s fine. That’s completely fine.

“What if,” Ben says slowly, “you went into the bathroom, and started the shower, and got in. And when you tell me it’s okay, I’ll come in and sit outside the curtain and talk to you?” He’s thinking of Eddie. “And you won’t be alone.”

Bev nods and takes off her suit jacket. “Yeah, it’s just—the getting up is hard.”

“I know.”

So that’s what they do. Bev stands up, leaving her shoes and her suit jacket on the floor next to the bed, and Ben takes her spot on the end of the mattress and listens to the shower curtain rings scrape on the rod, and then the water wheezes on. He hears when she gets in, the deep thrum of water on plastic suddenly softening against skin.

“Ben?”

“Coming,” he says, and gets up. He pauses in the doorway, but he can’t even tell if she has a silhouette behind the opaque white curtain. “Should I just sit here?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she says.

He closes the toilet seat and sits on the lid. He can’t think of one thing to say.

Bev calls him on it immediately. “I thought you were gonna talk to me.”

“Yeah, I’m—brain, just empty,” Ben manages. “Uh—I think that you could be... Whatever you wanted to be... If you could realize... all the dreams you have inside.”

There is a prolonged silence before Bev tugs the curtain aside just enough so that her face appears against the wall. She’s grinning. Ben feels less stupid.

“Don’t be afraid,” he recites, too mortified to sing. “If you’re got something to say, just open up your heart and let it show you the way.”

Her mouth strains for a moment, lips trying to hold back the smile, and then she vanishes behind the curtain again. “That’s a late nineties hit, New Kid.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess I... may have been into New Kids... a lot longer than was appropriate,” Ben says. “You know, if it was ever appropriate.”

“Oh, it was so appropriate,” Bev says. “You were so cute. I mean, you are so cute, but you and your little Walkman.”

“My *Walkman*,” Ben says. He looks over at the mirror, at the steam clouding over the glass, and rubs a hand through his hair idly. “It, uh, was my mom’s. I wasn’t supposed to take it out of the house, but she was working early mornings, and I was getting up on my own, so I snuck it.”

“Mmm, you’re blowing my mind this time,” Bev says.

He laughs.

“Okay I was stupid and I got in without the little bottles of shampoo and conditioner or the soap, if I stick my hand out—”

He sits up and looks at the countertop again, finding them. “Yeah,” he says.

She appears again, just enough space to get her arm out, with a slice of her shoulder and one eye visible beyond the curtain. Ben places the tiny shampoo bottle and the conditioner bottle into her hand one at a time, and starts trying to take the plastic wrapper off the soap. He fucks up, rips it in half, and fumbles the little round bar up in the air, which he then manages to catch.

When he looks back up, the corner of Bev’s mouth is pulled up in a smile.

“Uh, here,” he says, holding the soap out to her.

Her hand reappears and she takes it from him, and then whiskers the curtain shut again.

“So, Coke or Pepsi, New Kid?” she asks.

He smiles. “Really?”

“Really.” There’s the plastic click of a cap opening.

He leans back against the toilet tank, careful not to jostle the lid. “I, uh... Let me think. One was invented before refrigeration.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Bev laughs.

He doesn’t really drink soda much anymore, but he knows one is better for him than the other, if there’s a sliding scale of *healthy* soda. “No, one was invented before refrigeration, so you’re meant to drink it warm, and the other was invented after, so you’re meant to drink it cold, and that one has more sugar. Because, you know, when things are cold, it has to be more strongly flavored.”

“So which is which?”

“I—uh, don’t remember. Probably Coke is the older one, right?”

She laughs. “I don’t know, but probably.”

“So whichever has the least sugar.”

“You don’t like sugar?”

Ben *loves* sugar, he just doesn’t let himself have it anymore because he’s convinced he won’t be able to stop. “I like sugar, but too much is bad for me.”

“Does Coke Zero work for you then, or what?”

“I mean aspartame is some two hundred times sweeter than actual sugar—”

“Oh my god!” Bev appears in the curtain again, smiling incredibly wide. He feels better just seeing it. “Are you Eddie Kaspbrak? Is the

real Ben in a car with Richie right now?"

"Yes, that's how Richie survived spitting on him," Ben says drily. "It's a real thing, though, the FDA says that aspartame is an appetite stimulant. And sugar's addictive—I've been to Japan, all the sweets are so much less sweeter, and coming back it was like—" He gestures at either side of his face, trying to convey the sheer shock on his tongue when he came back and started eating things other than adzuki beans.

Bev goes back behind the curtain. "Did you take a nutrition class in college, or...?"

"No," Ben says. There was a gen ed requirement for health, but the idea of walking into the room and talking about food every day made his heart race in a way he didn't want to contemplate, so he took introductory psychology instead. "I travel a lot, I have a lot of time on my hands, I get lost on Wikipedia."

"Wikipedia has comparison tables between Coke and Pepsi?"

"No, I like, listen to podcasts when I run, too."

"That and New Kids on the Block."

"Yes, always New Kids on the Block," Ben says, though that's less true and more deep knowledge he didn't know he still retained. "Do I ask you a question now?"

"Okay."

"Okay." He asks the first thing he can think of. "Cats or dogs?"

"For like, having pets?"

"Yep."

Ben's never had a pet. He travels too frequently for it to be fair to an animal, especially one dependent on him for his meals. There was a therapy cat in the hospital when his mom was doing her treatment, who sometimes sat on her lap while she was hooked up to the IV, but she shook her head when he asked if that was something she'd want

at home.

"I've never had a dog," Bev says. Her tone has turned contemplative. "That would be nice, right? A lot of designers have dogs, I just never did."

"Do you mean, like, one you could carry around with you?" That's still fashionable, right? Ben has no concept of anything.

"Nah, something bigger. Something that could take care of itself, if it needed to."

Ben thinks about what abusive partners do to vulnerable animals and understands why Bev would prefer a big dog.

"Something with a face that could breathe if you took it running," Bev says.

He sits up a little. "Do you want to get a dog?"

She laughs. "I don't know. Maybe. Let me think about it."

She's naked in the room with him and only now is Ben's heart pounding. A dog is a commitment. A shared dog is a commitment. Ben's still going to have to travel, but a dog shared between two people is—not a dog halved, but it would definitely be their dog, and a dog would live in the house with them.

"Is it my turn to ask a question?" she asks.

"It can be. Technically I asked two."

"Oh, so I get two?"

He smiles. "If you want."

"Okay. What's the best business trip you've ever been on?"

He's still thinking about Japan, but he tries to drag his brain away from it for now. "I, uh. Did this really cool partnership with Moriyama and Teshima, back in, I want to say, eight years ago? We went to this museum in Ontario, and they had one of those historical

villages, for the re-enactors, where the kids go on field trips and things. So we reopened the museum—it's really bright, and has this big colorful front, you know, and then behind it were all these historical re-enactors in this actual old village. I walked through it and—” He shakes his head. It should remind him of falling into the clubhouse after all those years, but it doesn’t. “All that was made to last. It was really cool, trying to work out how to... like, MTA are so modern.”

“Of course,” Bev says, and he can hear the smile in her voice

Ben laughs a little. “And then there were these dark nineteenth-century overshot barns, and these little colonial buildings brought in from all over and just put together there. It was... really cool to walk around.” He thinks about it, sometimes, the big square wall at the front of the meat market concealing the peak of the gable behind it, and all the dark paint. The porch in front of one of the well-to-do houses, with the climbing trellises on either side of the front steps.

That was after his mom died, actually. He has no idea why MTA would be interested in him, with his weird and controversial space between “modernist abomination” (his communications tower, the Derry Public Library glass hallway turned on its side) and “a little bit country.” But he needed it, then. God, he needed it. He walked up those porch steps and he stood with his hands on the banister and gazed out across the old land and he felt... calm.

“I don’t know if it was the best business trip,” he admits after a moment. “But it was a pretty cool project.”

“It sounds cool.”

He’d take her there, if she wanted to go.

“Okay, I’m coming out now,” Bev says. The shower shuts off, and then there’s a splattering of water.

Ben turns and picks up one of the two towels. “I’ll just...” he says, holding the towel out toward the curtain stupidly.

“It’s okay,” Bev says. He hears the curtain rings clink together and

closes his eyes. There's a pause, and then she takes the towel from his hand. "Why are your eyes shut?"

"You said you didn't want to be looked at," Ben says.

There is a pause. "I did say that."

He reaches his other hand out for the door and walks out of the bathroom, only opening his eyes when he's certain he's facing the bed, and he needs to be able to see so as not to trip over his own backpack. His clothes are soaked; he unpacks his bag and starts laying them out on the desk, hanging them up in the closet to dry out overnight. Bev creeps by behind him—definitely Bev, based on the smell of shampoo and the warmth of her body—and opens up her own suitcase.

"You have some clothes in here," she says.

"Good," says Ben. "Otherwise I'd be down to two shirts."

She laughs and then there's the sound of shifting fabric. "Okay, it's safe now," she says.

He looks, and she's wearing his pajama pants. Her own pajama shirt, but his pants. Her hair is wet.

"Is this okay?" she asks.

Ben nods.

"Okay," she says.

She turns down one side of the bed and climbs in, and Ben turns out the light, peels out of his jeans and shirts, and joins her. At first he isn't sure if she wants to be touched, but then she throws one arm over him in the dark and rolls to rest her head on his chest. Her wet hair is cold on his skin.

"Is this all right?" she asks.

"Yes, of course," he says. He rests one hand on her back.

There is a long silence.

Then she says, “I didn’t want you to hear any of that.”

He blinks. “Of what?”

“What It said.”

He thinks she means the voices that It taunted her with, the ones he could hear when he heard her struggling, drowning, somewhere above the ground as the clubhouse filled with soil around him. Pennywise had spoken to him too, of dying alone, but he wasn’t alone.

Then Bev says, “In the truck.”

He sits up slightly, despite himself, and immediately lowers himself back down. “You heard It? In the truck?”

It’s dark enough that he can only see the suggestion of her face in the blue light from the window.

“You didn’t?” she asks.

“No, I heard you.” Saying *no* and reciting the poem and cursing, and thumping the tape deck with her shoe as it spat out blood.

Bev is quiet for a moment. He feels her hand close into a fist, and then she turns her face directly into his chest, and does not speak further. There’s wetness on his chest, but her breathing doesn’t change and she makes no sounds, and he can’t tell whether it’s water from her wet hair or if she’s silently crying. He strokes his fingers along the bumps of her spine until he thinks she falls asleep. He hopes. He falls asleep himself before he consciously decides to stop.

Bev calls Kay again.

The sun is high. The bloodstains on the cloth interior are turning brown, though they didn’t dry overnight. There’s a thick sludge on the floor. When they stopped for gas, Ben took a scraper from one of

the containers with windshield wiping fluid, and Bev tucked up her feet, and he tried to drag the blood out, but he couldn't get it over the lip of the door with any consistency.

She barely notices the smell now. Something familiar and animal, instead of the reek of old blood.

"If I asked you to meet me somewhere," she asks, "would you?"

Kay is quiet for a moment. Then she says, "Is it a place you're staying?"

"No," Bev replies.

"Don't tell me where you're going."

"Okay."

"And pick a place Tom will never go."

So they arrange to meet up in Gary, Indiana.

Kay reports that she will be bringing her bodyguard with her. "His name is James, he specializes in sitting next to me and not talking," she says.

Bev is impressed. "Nice work, if you can get it."

Kay laughs a little over the phone. "That's what I want from men, these days."

Bev glances at Ben. They're on his second shift driving—he drove four hours, then she drove four hours, and in the passenger seat Ben set a timer on his phone and fell asleep for about half an hour, then woke up and played navigator while she was driving. When he's behind the wheel he's quiet and focused; when she's driving he talks about art, asks her questions about places she'd like to go, and occasionally plays New Kids on the Block songs to make her laugh.

If the blood on the floor of the cab bothers him, he doesn't mention it. When they stop to get gas or use a restroom, nobody comments on their footprints.

“I don’t blame you,” Bev replies.

“So when I walk in with this massive silent dude, don’t get freaked out.”

“Uh,” Bev says.

Kay seems to consider for a moment and then asks, “How massive is the guy you’re seeing?”

“Um,” says Bev.

“Good for you,” says Kay.

“Kay!”

Ben glances over at her in the passenger seat, his expression questioning but not concerned.

“Don’t tell me anything about him until I meet him,” Kay says.

Knowing that they’re going to the Chicago area makes Bev nervous. Logically she knows that Tom isn’t about to surface out from the truck bed, but illogically she feels like he could be waiting at any gas station. She doesn’t sleep much that shift, just toys with the aux cord plugged into the dashboard and occasionally harasses Ben with New Kids.

The blood coming out of the tape deck seems to have had no effect on the speakers.

“Have you been to Chicago before?” she asks.

Ben nods. “I got a sinus infection in Chicago.”

That was not what she expected him to say.

“Yeah, the ventilation in my hotel—there was a vent, like, blowing in my face all night. So I woke up in the morning, and I coughed up like everything in the vent, and then I went to this yacht club. I met Jeanne Gang there, actually. She did Aqua.”

“The skyscraper?”

Ben nods.

Tom was never impressed by the nautical theme in Lake Shore East. He liked their blue and white house alongside other identical pastel houses, all so alike that it took Bev weeks before she could pick out her own home just by looking at it instead of checking the house number. He looked at the greystones, when they were deciding to buy a house instead of rent another apartment, but dismissed them all as looking dirty.

“I think I would like Chicago more, maybe ten years from now,” Bev says quietly.

Ben raises his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She loved looking at the skyline when she first moved there, remembers the feeling of wonder she had when she learned to be comfortable, going from her tiny apartment with her friends of friends from college, to work in Standard Brands. She felt like she could walk anywhere, like the whole city of Chicago was open to her and all she had to do was eat up the ground with her feet.

Now the idea of walking back through those places—places she was once happy—is sullied. Spoiled by hurt feelings. Places she walked around with her sleeves pulled down over her wrists and large sunglasses on gray days.

He took the beauty right out of a place that used to be hers. That’s what Tom did.

“I don’t really care for the commercial style,” Ben admits.

Bev looks back at him, perplexed.

“Yeah. Feels a little... too heavily industrial. A little claustrophobic. Sometimes people want that, and sometimes it’s appropriate for the setting, but... it’s not what I want. I want to feel like I can get out.” He drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

Bev says, “They tell me you are wicked and I believe them.”

If he recognizes it, Ben does not speak.

Bev doesn't know the whole poem. "And they tell me you are crooked, and I answer: Yes it is true... And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is... Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning."

It felt good, the first time she read it, back in high school. Felt like something she wanted to be—fierce and redhead and unstoppable, and hungry, and laughing.

Now it just reminds her of Tom. They've only been married six years. When does she get the rest of herself back?

Ben says, "You like poetry."

Bev laughs. "After all this time, you didn't think I liked poetry?"

"No, I'm just a little embarrassed to know that you like good poetry."

She laughs, leaning back. "I used to Google *January embers*, trying to figure out where I'd heard it before."

There's a flush on his face. "I, uh, thought it was a haiku. I wrote it during our haiku unit at school."

"Did we have a haiku unit?"

"We did," he says.

Bev puts her fingers up and begins counting syllables.

"Uh, I adhered... a little more strongly to the assignment to write about a nature image, than I did to the five-seven-five—you know, the basic thing that everyone knows about haiku," Ben admits.

Bev puts her fingers down, smiling. "I was... so happy the day I got that," she says.

She remembers sitting in her bathtub, that blue-green porcelain, and holding the postcard out in front of her. There was something

inherently romantic about it—the postcard delivered anonymously, as though from foreign places, though of course it was just a *Welcome to Derry* card from the library. She felt that, when she pried away the floorboard and held it out in front of her. The light just coming in from the window up above the shower, and the way she felt safe for once in her home, like she was shored up for a tornado drill or for a flood.

“I’m sorry I had to burn it.”

“But you remember it,” Ben says.

She nods.

“God, if I knew I was gonna be a one-hit wonder...”

She laughs.

He’s smiling. “What else do you like?”

She massages her temples with the heels of her hands. “I don’t have any full poems memorized.” None of her other boyfriends ever gave her poetry, and she’s glad of it now—either, when she sought out the kind of man who would break her nose without warning, she ruled out the kind of men who would give her poetry, or this one thing remained untouched deep inside her. “I, uh—” She looks over at Ben, whose eyes are still on the road, but whose long lashes are distracting. “*Reach me down my Tycho Brahe. I would know him when we meet.*”

“I know that one,” Ben agrees.

She covers her mouth with her hand. *I would know him when we meet* —the way she hadn’t known Ben, just by reading his work, but when he said *Is there a password* it opened up something hidden inside her mind. He was carrying something that day, that was why he was struggling to get onto his bike, with that and his Walkman—stolen from his mother. Some kind of diorama? *I would know him when we meet.*

Something in her chest aches.

“And then—that poem from the new J.K. Rowling book?” she asks. “*Why were you born when the leaves were falling? You should have come to the cuckoo’s calling.*” She smiles, trying to remember. “*Why did you die when the lambs were cropping? You should have died at the apples’ dropping.*”

“I’m getting kind of a dark vibe here,” Ben says.

She laughs. “And then *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. ‘Do I dare to eat a peach?’ And the one they made into that song from *Cats*, I remember getting chills reading the lines—something about sawdust and crooked eyes and sand stains. And... did you read *The Time Traveler’s Wife*? ”

Ben blushes, suddenly. “Yeah,” he says.

She watches him, astonished. “You were completely unabashed about New Kids on the Block, when you were a kid, but *The Time Traveler’s Wife* makes you make that face?”

“First of all, I was absolutely abashed, you should have seen me just about dying the first time all the guys came into my room,” Ben says. “Second, I’m just thinking about redhead women from Chicago whom I remember from a lifetime ago and understanding some new things about myself.”

Bev leans back against the bench seat and laughs. “Are you saying you have a type?”

“Apparently, unbeknownst to me, I have a type,” Ben says.

Bev knew she had a type, it just always startled her when the men she was interested in suddenly revealed themselves to be similar. Ben’s not like that. She knows that, and she’s got to stop waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Well, there’s a poem from there, and it starts out *Angel!*” She grins, watching him. “And that’s literally the only thing I remember about it. *Angel!*”

“*Angel!*” Ben repeats, urgently.

They go back and forth. “*Angel!*”

“*Angel!*” He smiles that round-cheeked smile.

“Anyway, are you scoping out my poetry tastes because you’re looking to do an encore, after twenty-seven years?” she asks.

Ben shrugs. “If the spirit moves me. I made a mistake, setting the bar so high the first time. How am I ever going to live up to my thirteen-year-old self?” His tone is airy and dry, and a little strained.

She almost frowns, hearing it. Like there’s something wrong with his thirteen-year-old self.

“I’m gonna play the song from *Cats*,” she warns him.

“Go on. It’s not a road trip unless you play the song from *Cats*.”

She puts the song on and sings at the top of her voice, dramatic and off-key. Ben joins in. He’s a much better singer, but seems to do better when the volume is too high for him to hear himself.

When the song is over, Bev cranks the volume down several notches and asks, “Do you like seafood?”

“I do like seafood,” he says. “I will probably never eat crab legs or caviar ever again, but I do like seafood.”

They meet Kay at a seafood restaurant. Bev panics when they walk in—admittedly a little travel-rumpled—and have to give a name for their table. She doesn’t want to give her own name—even though she knows Tom has no idea where she is, isn’t exactly driving around Chicago in ever-expanding circles, waiting for her to show up in a bloody truck with an architect.

“Four for Hanscom,” Ben says calmly. “And could we have a private table, please?”

Bev rapidly texts Kay to ask for Hanscom when she gets here. The waiter obligingly leads them toward a booth.

The menu is divided into “Specialty Lobster Rolls” and “Farm to

Pier.” Bev looks at the cocktail menu and asks, “Do I have the last leg of driving here?”

“Only if you want to,” Ben says. “I could get us a hotel room.”

Then Kay walks in and Bev realizes that she’s absolutely going to need to drink with dinner.

Kay looks young—has always looked young—and has a sort of immortal quality to her. At the moment her face is dominated by a large scar stretching from her nose across her face. There are deep bruises under both her eyes, and her arm is in a sling. Bev stands up as soon as she sees her, horrified.

“Oh my god, Kay.”

“Bev!” Kay walks straight into Bev’s hug and puts her head on Bev’s shoulder. “God, you’re okay.”

“Are you okay?” Bev wants to hold Kay by the shoulders, but she’s afraid to touch her bad arm. “God, did he...?” She raises her hand to Kay’s cheek, reminded strongly of trying to pinch the wound in Eddie’s face closed as he drooled blood over his chin and throat.

Kay takes a step back and Beverly lowers her hand. “Yeah, he did.” She’s not smiling, but there’s a ferocity in her eyes Bev recognizes. She felt it, she thinks, not the first time Tom punched her across the face, but maybe the second time. It went away, after a while.

“Oh my god,” Bev manages. “Oh my god.”

Kay shakes her head. “I told you I put my pictures in the papers. I... may have made some small trouble for you, financially.”

“Don’t care, I haven’t seen a cent of that money since I ran.”

“God.” Kay leans down and kisses Bev on the cheekbone, then turns to look at Ben.

Ben is sitting in a chair rather than in the booth, and he gets up when he’s acknowledged. “Ben Hanscom, ma’am,” he says, and holds out his hand to shake.

Purse swinging down her arm, Kay grabs Ben's hand with both of hers. "Hi, Ben Hanscom," she says. "You ever lay hand on my girl here, and I'll castrate you with broken glass."

"Kay," Bev says.

"I'm tired," Kay says, "of pretending I don't want to do that to your husband."

Ben looks... surprised, but not intimidated. "Understood," he says calmly.

"Since we have that established." Kay turns and introduces them both to her guest.

James is about an inch shorter than Ben but visibly weighs more, and looks as though he might be a body builder in his off time. He addresses Bev as "ma'am" and Ben as "sir," and then takes a seat with a view of the exits.

Kay slides into the booth with Bev. "So are you going back to wherever you've been?"

"No." Bev shakes her head. "No, never."

"Then is it safe to tell me where you ran?"

"Maine," Bev replies.

The waiter comes back. Bev revisits her cocktail menu and orders something advertised as a "fishbowl" because it has vodka in it, and because their Bloody Mary has bacon in it and she's just not up for that tonight. Kay orders a margarita and explains her choice to the waiter as: "because fuck it."

The waiter's eyebrows go up, but he nods and takes their menus. James says he'll be drinking water, and Ben grimaces before ordering a Coke. Bev thinks about sugar content and asking him whether he'll be able to taste it if it's served cold, but now in front of Kay is not the time.

When the waiter goes, Kay asks, "What's in Maine?"

“I grew up there,” Bev says. She ought to be surprised that Kay doesn’t know this, but it’s weird how Bev’s whole life seems to have conspired so she never has to think about her past. She’s had a lot of time to dwell on her story while the Losers have all been hashing it out on the stand for the benefit of Richie’s trial. “I had a lot of friends growing up there that I just forgot about. Ben’s one of them.”

Ben gives a short wave, his hand at the level of the table.

“And the Italian guy?”

“He’s still not Italian,” Bev says. “But yes, Eddie. And Mike, and Richie, and Bill, and Stanley.”

“I can see why you lost touch with them,” Kay says.

Bev met Kay as a fashion designer when she moved to Chicago. Half of what she learned about the city, she learned from Kay, trailing along after her on touristy trips to the Bean or the Field Museum or the Library Center. But Kay lost a bit of her cultural zeitgeist as a designer and started really breaking ground with her feminist writing. The first two did better than her most recent one, but Kay remains rabidly feminist at all times.

Being a feminist does not make an expert in domestic violence. But the first time after her marriage that Bev saw *Why Does He Do That?* on Kay’s coffee table made her incredibly aware that Kay would be vigilant, and that Kay was unlikely to miss Bev’s overdressing in the summer or her carefully-applied concealer to cover her bruises.

“No, I lost touch with them long before Tom,” Bev replies. Not that Tom would have stood for her having six male friends. He barely stood for her having Kay. “The day I left—my friend Stanley killed himself.”

Kay winces. “Jesus, Bev.”

“Yeah,” she says. Lying to Kay rarely lasts in the long run, but there’s no shame associated with these falsehoods—just the quiet knowledge of what they did, and the resolution not to go to jail over Henry Bowers. “So Mike called me up, inviting me back for Stan’s memorial

service. And I had to go.”

The waiter comes back with Bev’s fishbowl. It is cheerfully blue and has a rubber duck floating in it.

“God bless,” Kay says when she sees it, or perhaps when he sets down her margarita.

“So of course Tom took issue with that.” Bev’s gaze flicks back to the scar on Kay’s cheek.

“We’ll get there,” Kay says, meeting her eyes and knowing. “When he showed up, he looked almost dead. Did you do that?”

A pang of discomfort—something between shame and pride, and both loathsome in this moment—aches in Bev’s gut. “Yeah,” she says. “I did that.”

“Good for you,” Kay says seriously.

Ben sips his coke, blinks as though startled by the fizziness, and stirs it with his straw.

“I never would have guessed Maine,” Kay says. “I don’t know anyone or anything in Maine.” She shakes her head. “He called asking if you’d come to talk to me. I told him I hadn’t seen you in two weeks. Then later he showed up. I answered the door—fucking stupid. He said he was a flower delivery—I have a peephole for a reason, I don’t know what I was thinking. Who’s gonna be sending me flowers? Sam?” Sam was Kay’s ex-husband.

Up until that moment, Bev had forgotten that Kay was also divorced. And that Kay would know at least one divorce lawyer.

“God, I’m sorry, Kay.”

“You didn’t fucking do it,” Kay replies. “Drink your fishbowl.”

Bev sips her fishbowl through the little black straw. The rubber duck bobs on the surface.

“I thought he’d kill you one day, Bev,” Kay says. “And I wasn’t the

only one. A lot of us were worried about you.”

The flush coming over Bev’s face isn’t just from the alcohol. “I thought he would, too,” she admits.

Ben sips his Coke.

“God,” Kay says. “You don’t know how happy I was that you called. I have—” She goes into her purse and pulls out a manila folder.

Bev is almost expecting info for that divorce lawyer she was just thinking of, but when she opens the folder she sees her own drawings. She puts her hand over her mouth. “Kay.”

“You took these when you left,” Kay says. “From your house. I was never there.”

James the bodyguard gives every indication that he can’t hear them at all, and continues staring impassively toward the door.

This means that—since Bev has no doubt Tom did nothing to clean up the mess that was their bedroom—Kay has been in their house and seen the wreckage of her vanity, all the bottles she threw at him in her effort to ward him off. Bev swallows. “I don’t have a purse.”

“We can put them in the glove compartment,” Ben says. “Or we can get you a purse.”

“Don’t let me see your car on the way out,” Kay says. “I don’t want to have to answer questions about makes and models, or license plates. Fuck.” A strange look comes over her face. “Oh, shit, you knew about this, didn’t you, cowboy?”

Ben blinks several times at being called *cowboy*.

“He knows,” Bev replies. “Not—details, but he knows.”

“While it was happening?” Kay demands.

Bev tries to sooth her, to keep her voice down. “No, no, I told you, we just met up.”

“Right, right.” Some of Kay’s bristles soften. “And you said you had a friend in trouble.”

“Yeah,” Bev says. “I was a material witness in an assault. We both were.” She grimaces. “Uh, you’re not gonna believe this, but while we were back home honoring Stan’s memory, an escaped mental patient broke into our hotel and stabbed Eddie in the face.”

Kay stares at her. “You’re shitting me.”

Bev shakes her head and pushes her rubber duck around her fishbowl.

Kay drains half of her margarita. “A fucking *what?*”

“An escaped mental patient,” Bev replies. “We knew him, when we were kids. He was... arrested for all these murders when we were thirteen, it was a big deal.” Alvin Marsh was one of the murderers he was arrested for. Bev isn’t sure what kind of magic ensured her involvement was never noticed, or whether to be thankful for it or condemn it, but it was convenient in the moment.

“You *knew* a murderer?”

Well, strictly speaking, Richie’s homicide was declared justifiable, so Bev knows two. If the definition of *murder* is expanded to non-human entities, she is herself one of many.

“Where the hell did you grow up, *The Twilight Zone?*”

“Yes,” Ben replies seriously.

Bev chokes on her fishbowl.

Kay turns—she seems to be going through intermittent phases of remembering that Ben exists—and examines him frankly. “And what, you were the quarterback growing up and you got back together at the memorial?”

“Kay, be nice,” Bev says.

Ben makes a weird face behind his Coke. “I was the little fat kid

obsessed with New Kids on the Block and always getting beaten up outside the public library, and Bev was the only person who signed my middle school yearbook.”

“Ben,” Bev says.

Ben shrugs, like the truth is out of his hands.

“And now you’re running away together?” Kay asks, challenging but not unkind.

Ben glances back up at Bev.

“Yes,” Bev says. It’s not exactly what she wants to say—*running away* doesn’t sound quite right, but that’s what she’s doing. It feels a bit late to do anything else. “And maybe getting a dog. We’re thinking about it.”

“That’s a big step,” Kay says. “Seems kinda fast.”

“It’s been twenty-seven years in the making,” Bev says firmly.

Ben goes red.

Kay looks from him to Beverly, who feels the same quiet conviction she felt crouching in the woods outside of the clubhouse. That was one of the things she’d forgotten—the utter conviction with which everything is lived as a teenager!—and now she feels it’s owed her once more.

“If anything happens,” Kay says, “you can always come to me.” The scar goes from her nostril almost to her ear; it bisects her face. She picks up her menu. “Money, lawyers, anything.”

“I need your divorce lawyer,” Bev replies flatly.

“Now you’re talkin’,” Kay says. She takes out her phone, opens up a webpage, and begins searching.

“And I’m suing him for half the company,” she adds.

“Hell, take the whole thing,” Kay says. “It’s your work. We all know

it's your work."

"And I'm going to stat my life over and it's going to be mine this time," Bev says.

"Here here." Kay lifts her margarita glass. Bev doesn't trust herself to lift her fishbowl without slopping blue raspberry lemonade and vodka onto the table, but Ben raises his Coke. Kay eyes him for a moment, and then clicks her glass against his. She takes a massive gulp of her margarita, and Ben looks Bev in the eye and quietly takes another sip of his soda through his straw.

Notes for the Chapter:

Quotes and references, in order of appearance:

Ben quotes "Stay the Same" by Joey McIntire, which I found on New Kids on the Block's *Greatest Hits* album (released in 2013).

Ben worked with [Moriyama & Teshima](#) on [Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum](#) and the associated Doon Heritage Village in Ontario.

[Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang](#) did not just [Aqua Tower](#) in Chicago, but also a number of other buildings Bev probably recognizes by sight. My impressions of Chicago are based entirely on reading *The Time Traveler's Wife* and a week-long trip to Chicago I took in the early 2010s, during which I got a sinus infection from sleeping in front of a vent. I did get wined and dined at a yacht club, though.

Bev quotes [Chicago by Carl Sandburg](#), one of my favorite poems, as well as [The Old Astronomer to His Pupil by Sarah Williams](#); [A Dirge by Christina Rosetti](#), famously used in J.K. Rowling's book *The Cuckoo's Calling* as Robert Galbraith; T.S. Eliot's [The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](#) and [Rhapsody on a Windy Night](#), the latter of which was of course the inspiration for the ballad standard "Memory" from

Cats; and Rainer Maria Rilke's Fifth *Duino Elegy*, famously used in Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

Bev meets Kay at, God help me, [Captain's House Restaurant](#) in Gary, Indiana, a place I have never been to; but I did play Winthrop Paroo in *The Music Man* one time, so I have a lingering affection for the city and as soon as I saw it pop up on my road trip map for Ben and Bev I was like, "Aw man, they're going to Gary, Indiana."

Anyone who can guess my inspiration for James gets 4 points. Anyone who wants to talk about why I think Ben Hanscom and Beverly Marsh would both really enjoy the book *The Time Traveler's Wife*, meet me in the comments.

8. Out of Her Mind

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben works on being known. Bev works on knowing.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this one took a while, guys, first I had my anniversary and then I had a couple of low days, and this chapter in particular was like pulling teeth. It rehashes a bit of the lead-up to the hammered seance, but I hope you'll stick with me through this.

Content warnings: Bev's a little buzzed but initiates sex anyway, explicit sexual content, Ben has self-image issues, discussion of death of a parent and terminal illness, mentions of grief, canonical violence (Bowers cutting Ben, the rock fight), Ben is Not Forthcoming with his emotional distress and Bev is worried, Richie throws up some more, and Tom Rogan continues to be a scumbag.

Also: Bev remembers a pregnancy scare where her period was late and she induced it through vitamin C toxicity. We know (if you've read the book) that all the Losers were sterilized after fighting It, so it was just a late period for Bev, but--poisoning yourself is never safe, and this fic is not an instruction on how to abort! I putz around with a lot of stuff I don't know anything about here--cars, architecture, the criminal justice system--and this is no different! Do not take medical advice from fanfiction featuring ghosts!

Ben likes Kay.

She hugs Bev hard at the end of the meal and reminds her, "Don't let me see where you're going," and leaves with her bodyguard. James only nods at them both as they exit the restaurant; his frank refusal to eat anything caused their waiter what looked like significant

distress, which James seemed to notice not at all. And Bev walks away with a manila folder full of her own sketches, the contact information for a divorce lawyer in Chicago, and a rubber duck only slightly stained blue from her fishbowl drink.

Ben asks, “Should we go to a hotel?”

The rubber duck is nautical themed; it’s wearing a little blue pirate hat. She turns it over in her hand and then nods.

“Is there still vodka in that?” Ben asks, looking at the duck.

Bev examines it, then opens her mouth and squeezes the duck like a lemon slice. He can hear liquid squeak out. After a moment she relaxes her hand, swallows, and then says, “Not anymore.”

He is so in love with her.

He looks up hotels in the area, decides that the one that is both hotel and casino is probably not the best fit for their current needs (low-key and where Bev can fall asleep without hearing other drunk people staggering up and down the halls, or jackpots going off at all hours of night), and plugs in the address for the next best-rated hotel. It has a very good rating. He sets the GPS to guide him and Bev continues playing DJ through his phone, her expression changing slightly as she puts on Tracy Chapman.

“Yeah?” Ben asks.

Bev tilts her head back. “God, I think I loved this song when I was a kid.”

“Turn it up,” Ben says, and so she does and they sit in quiet, too spellbound to even attempt to sing along. There’s no blood on the floor of the truck; there’s no manila folder tucked into the glove compartment; there’s just them wondering *if not now, then when?* He feels a little bit like a building’s settling around him, like the way he felt as they all fell asleep in the hotel room after the quarry, her hand in his.

The truck full of blood necessitates a shower, when they get back to the hotel. Ben is taking off his boots when Bev takes hold of both his

hands and leads him backwards into the bathroom, the look on her face telling him she doesn't want him to sit outside this time. He tries to guess the alcohol content of her drink, aware of the way caffeine is making his brain hum in distraction.

"You sure?" he asks.

She nods. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Are you sober?" he asks.

She laughs. "You've been watching me drink since Derry and you don't know what I can handle yet?"

Bev likes to take extremely hot showers, to the point where as soon as she steps under the spray a flush goes up on her clear white skin. She sighs in what sounds like relief. Ben, feeling large and awkward on the other half of the bathtub, observes that the room's going to steam up hot enough he won't have time to be cold.

She's still beautiful. He focuses on that so he doesn't have to think about her eyes on him—and she lets him wash her hair, switching places so he blocks the spray for her and massages the hotel shampoo down to her scalp. She tilts her head back when he scratches with his nails. Ben immediately resolves to get better at scalp massages, because when she's relaxed she stands like a dancer, her head up and half-leaning into him.

"I'm never gonna let you out of this shower," she groans.

"I'm okay with that," he says seriously, because that's the voice she uses when she's just come.

She laughs her graceful laugh, not even a little self-conscious. It seems to bound out of her and ring against the tile walls.

They trade places so she can rinse her hair, and then she tells him to close his eyes and he does, even though he's pretty sure there's not an inch of her that would turn him off. She stretched her arms over her head today and he saw a patch of copper stubble growing in her armpit and startled himself with how much he wanted to push his face into it.

“I’m gonna touch you,” she warns him, while his eyes are still closed.

Abruptly the heat of the room goes taut and he’s very aware of his body, the way the water on his back is cooling.

“Okay,” he says. He doesn’t open his eyes.

She touches him carefully, like she’s afraid he’ll startle. Her hands settle on his trapezius, fingertips just touching the vertebra at the top of his back, and she smooths her hands down his shoulders like she can get him to settle. He tries not to move, tries just to let her explore as she soaps him up, because this is something he hasn’t really done for her yet and clearly it’s something she wants, and when her palms circle over his nipples his brain stops its panic spiral about his chest hair and his head tilts back and he sighs.

“Good?” she asks, her voice low.

He’s blushing—which is stupid, because they’ve been sleeping together for weeks—but he hopes he can pass it off as the heat of the shower. He nods because it’s true, it is good, it’s better than being in his head about it. Her thumb finds his sternum and follows it down and he can handle that, too, because there’s some kind of deeper intimacy there, the way that bones are deeper than muscle. He feels like an anatomy diagram, lighting up as she touches him—*pectoralis major, serratus anterior*.

She pauses with her hands high up on his obliques, and Ben is afraid to open his eyes to see what she’s looking at. He’s sure it’s either the scars just inside his hip or the way he’s gotten hard to her touch, and he doesn’t think he can handle watching her eyes on him.

Instead he asks, “Do you think I can go down on you here, or are you afraid you’ll slip?”

“Jesus,” Bev says.

They turn again so Ben can kneel without actually drowning under the shower head, and he gets down on his knees. When he holds himself up he’s at a level with her breasts, and he kisses the crescent-moon mole there, and when he sits back on his heels he can kiss the

inside of her thigh. He holds her hips, trying to keep her from having to touch the cold tile, and after a moment Bev says, “Okay, that’s not gonna work, hold on,” and steps over his shoulder so she’s standing over him. It’s visceral and serious, and he doesn’t care if he can breathe. He goes after her with lips and tongue and his lower jaw, grinding up into her until she puts all her weight on his shoulders and grabs hold of his hair and moans, and when she comes she shifts forward in a way that makes him convinced for a second she’s going to fall, so he grabs her hip and she hisses and her hips push against his face.

“Fuck, condoms,” she mutters.

By now he knows what she wants, so he slides two fingers inside her and holds her hip against his shoulder, and she dissolves into a stream of profanity scaling up and up, shivers, and comes again.

“Fuck!” she repeats, sounding almost angry.

He leans back so he can look up at her, her wide eyes and fine brows and square jaw. “What?” he asks.

“I didn’t think I could do that, I’m over forty!” she says.

It takes him a moment to realize she means coming twice that fast, and he hums and turns his fingers inside her, stretching his knuckles. “Do you want another?”

“No, I want to go fuck where I don’t have to be an Olympic gymnast to stay upright.”

The frustration in her voice makes him smile; he pulls his fingers out carefully and sucks them clean instead of bothering with the spray, and Bev says, “That’s it, get out, I’m sorry we’re not washing your hair, let’s go.”

They don’t bother with towels, they just spill out of the bathroom and soaking wet onto the hotel bed. Ben tries to yank the duvet down so she lands on the sheets instead, but she’s already leaning across the whole bed to reach into her suitcase for the condoms. Her hands are clumsy (he did that) and eventually she hands him the wrapper for

him to rip open. He does and rolls it on, and she kneels up and lowers herself down on him with that determined look on her face.

Ben has never left bed with Beverly Marsh worried she was unsatisfied, and while he'd like to attribute that to his own skill, he has no doubt she wouldn't allow him to. Once again she shocks him with how strong she is, when she bucks her hips forward and makes him groan, holding herself up with one hand on his chest, and he puts one hand on her ribs so he can touch that crescent moon with his thumb. There is nothing in the world except her on him and tightening around him and her red lips open and panting, her setting the rhythm, and Ben hangs on, watching her, feeling her tightening down and biting the inside of his cheek to live through this so she gets what she needs.

She's starting to flutter again, her rhythm slowing, and there's water running down from her hair and sweat on her skin, and she stills, her fingers knotting, her expression tense and strained.

Ben pushes himself up, pulling her arms down around his shoulders, and rolls his hips up into her. The sound that comes out of her is loud and high and rings in his ears, and then there's a sharp pain as she bites down on his neck, but she's coming. She tightens down on him once and Ben hears himself make some kind of ridiculous noise as he stiffens, his hips push forward, and he shudders as he comes deep inside her. His vision goes smoky around the edges, the whole white and blue and orange room distorting, and when he blinks and it clears he realizes he's gripping her too tight.

Bev is panting in his ear. "Jesus," she says again.

He closes his eyes and ducks his head into her hair. She smells sweet. "Sorry."

She laughs, loud and incredulous and joyful—he *loves* her. "For what?"

"I, uh, actually couldn't see straight there for a minute," he admits.

She dissolves into little chuckles and he feels her head turn; he leans back a little so they can kiss. Her breasts are still pressed up against

his chest and her arms are around his neck; her skin is hot under the water evaporating off of her and he leans into her for that warmth. When she shifts and he grabs the condom so she can lift off of him he feels cold.

“Do you have anything to do for like, the next week, when we get to your place?” she asks, her words a little slurred at the edges.

No, if only by virtue of going off to Maine with no notice and dropping everything else on his plate. “Not unless you have something in mind.”

“Great, because we’re staying in bed for a week.”

Ben laughs as he ties off the condom and gets up to take care of it. “Sounds perfect.”

Part of him is apprehensive at the idea of her walking into a house he designed—especially because it’s not technically for her, and while his mom agreed it was beautiful the way Ben knew he’d done right was when he watched her wheeling from living room to kitchen and out to the back porch in the morning with her crossword puzzle calendar, everything perfectly arranged for her to flow unimpeded through the space. He loves the look of buildings—he’s proud of his designs, obviously—but the important thing is the way they feel. A house should contain its people but not restrain them, or impede them—there should be an entire life in there waiting to happen.

At the Bohemian Girl he made it for part of a life, but there was a death there waiting to happen, too. His mother knew it, as she slept in her recliner after her spinal taps, and Ben never spoke of it. He never questioned it—she gave him a death waiting to happen too, when she gave birth to him, but she gave him a place first, and all of her time and care, so all he could do was repay the favor. But it was a nice house close to where she was receiving treatment, and far out enough that she could pretend they didn’t drive into Omaha regularly, and when she sat out on the back porch with the wind coming over the hill she said she couldn’t smell any of the hospital smells that made her go gray in the face as they approached the treatment center, just grass.

The point is—Ben slept in the guest room when his mother was alive, and after she passed he waited until he could turn over the space without breaking down and then he took the master bedroom. But he's afraid Bev will walk in and be able to tell somehow—that when he made the house it was a stopgap, the illusion of running toward something when actually running away, and she'll look down at all the furniture and his dark gray bedding and be able to tell where his heart's been for the last seven years or so, and realize this isn't what she wanted.

But at the same time he can imagine her out on the back porch when the sun's going down, the way her hair would look limned in fire, and the lights coming on—the ones he made with his own hands. That part, he wants to say, *Come take a look at this.*

It's not bad—it's a piece of what he wants to give her, but if he wants to give her the life she wants he's going to have to do research.

"Would you rather," he mumbles into her hair, feeling her breath against his chest.

She chuckles a little and tightens her arm around him. "Yeah?"

"Go on a beach vacation... or go on a ski lodge vacation?"

She laughs again and asks, her voice warm, "What do you think happens to me when I go to the beach?"

Her skin's so pale that her lips turned a truly frightening blue before they left the quarry, and that was one of the reasons they had to get out. He should have guessed she'd burn easily.

"Say you have SPF nine thousand," he murmurs back. "I'll help you apply it."

She laughs. "Oh, well if you'll help me apply it."

"Mm-hmm."

"The real question is," she replies, "do you know how to ski?"

"I don't."

“Me either,” Bev says. “And I’m old enough now I don’t know if my knees could take it. I could probably learn to jet-ski before I could learn to ski, but I don’t really care much for the beach.”

“No?”

“No. Don’t tell Mike.”

He laughs at that. “I’m sure he won’t hold it against you.”

She idly pats his cheek. “I like sailing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I get a big hat with ribbons so it doesn’t blow away, and I still need that SPF nine thousand, but I like... being on the prow of the boat, when it’s going fast. The full *Titanic*.”

“The full *Titanic*,” Ben agrees gravely. He puts both hands around her waist. “Queen of the world.”

“It would ruin my whole world,” Bev sings, sleepy and breathless.

He kisses the crown of her head. “Don’t make me sing ‘My Heart Will Go On.’”

“I will call that bluff.”

He kisses her wet hair again—it’ll be wild when she wakes up, and he can hardly wait to see it. He wants her with the windows rolled down in the truck and her hair wind-tossed, and then he wants to pull up outside the house and see the look on her face when she takes in the stone front, and then he wants to hold her hand and lead her through to the back.

He forgot about Richie and Eddie.

They beat him to his own house by about an hour, which upsets the part of Ben’s brain that had his mother ruthlessly vacuuming the furniture and telling Ben to put the coasters away inside the end tables when company was coming. He’s not an untidy person, but he remembers all at once that his space is very much not ready for

guests, and he can only hope that his cleaning company has still been coming in and billing him in his absence.

“Yeah, open up the keypad,” he tells Richie so he can at least get into the garage and not have to hang out in front of the house for an undetermined period of time. “The code is one-nine-eight-nine.”

“That’s really sad, man,” Richie says, considering he’s already given Ben shit for his garage doors—it’s *one* garage, it’s just a three-car garage, Ben had his Caddy and his mother had her own car and then there was the sedan he drove her back from chemo in, with the cloth interior so she didn’t get conditioned to be sick when she smelled leather. Now it’s just the Caddy. The only palliative here is that Richie is clearly being Richie in every direction, having already described Eddie’s Escalade as *his Frisco Bay dad car*.

“Drink my beer, I don’t care,” Ben instructs him. He gives him the wifi information so they can amuse themselves in his garage and then hangs up before Richie can start giving him shit for his own De Ville. He knows, like, jack about cars, he just liked the look of it and bought it and now it’s in good condition through the combined efforts of Ben and his mechanic, Rose, a woman in her sixties who always goes into rapture whenever Ben drives up to the shop.

If he told Rose he wanted to completely replace the interior of this truck, Rose would probably go for it. It would depend on whether or not she could see the bloodstains.

“You forgot about them, didn’t you?” Bev asks, her voice sympathetic but knowing.

“Completely forgot about them,” he agrees, and then remembers their biggest anxieties about Bill. “I mean, not that they existed, just that they were stopping at my house.”

“I know,” Bev says.

There was something almost nice in the awe in Richie’s voice when he asked *Is this what the inside of your head looks like?* Much as he’d like to have Beverly alone—especially when she announced they weren’t getting out of bed for a week—there’s something like pulling

a band-aid off in the idea of having the Losers walk through his house too. A little of the pressure off.

When they pull up and Ben parks, then opens up the garage door manually because only the Caddy has an opener, he finds Richie and Eddie sitting on lawn chairs next to his freezer, Eddie's Escalade pulled into the farthest parking spot. They are hunched over Eddie's phone and have taken his instructions about the beer seriously.

Ben doesn't think he's ever had friends just stop by before. His mother had guests occasionally—they formed kind of a knitting circle as a way of coping with their hair falling out, and Ben obediently went to scope out locations with hand-knit hats from fall to spring that year—but it's been years since he came home and expected another person.

He feels tired after driving, but he says, "Sorry about that. Didn't think you were going to beat us here." And he's surprised to learn that's the bottom of his concern—the idea of hosting, now that he's finally made it.

Richie greets Bev with a *hello, gorgeous* and Eddie hovers with the lawn chairs.

"Don't worry about it," Ben says. He holds the door into the house open. "Go on in. Make yourselves comfortable. I'm gonna bring the truck in, and the bags." It feels smart, in the moment—he can watch any number of strange art critics approach a building he's designed with mixtures of awe or displeasure and it means nothing to him, but because it's the Losers he's as afraid of seeing their first responses as he is of watching Bev appraise his naked body.

She kisses him on the cheek as she walks into the house. Ben watches her step inside, watches Richie turn and wiggle his eyebrows at him before he follows her, and thinks, *There, she's going to see, I've done all I can.*

He turns back to Eddie, who is pulling suitcases out of the Escalade. He puts a hand on his shoulder, wanting to say *Thanks for coming* but unable to quite get the words out. "How are you?" he manages.

“Fine,” Eddie says. “You okay?”

Ben wonders if now that the people he talks to know him he’s completely an open book. “Good as can be expected.” He shrugs, uncomfortable. “I need a nap.” That’s it exactly; he just needs to reset, and then he can focus on being a good host and on showing Bev around the place and on taking care of his guests. “Are you guys okay for now, or should we order a pizza or something for lunch?”

Eddie gives him a skeptical look. “Is there a pizza place that delivers out here?”

The day his mother died, Ben drove back to the house from the hospital, sat down on his couch, put his head in his hands, and realized he’d completely forgotten about food. He called the nearest pizza place and promised to tip two hundred dollars if they would just bring him something he didn’t have to make himself.

“When you tip them right, yeah,” Ben says. “I don’t eat out much.”

Eddie bobs his head, a motion so completely Richie that Ben has a moment of sheer cognitive confusion. Then he looks contemplatively out at the terra cotta potted plant outside the garage.

“This is the kind of house that has a name,” he observes.

Ben smiles a little. “Bohemian Girl,” he admits. “Don’t tell Richie, it’s named after my mom, but you know how he’ll be.” He’s not ashamed of it; it’s in his portfolio as his first completely wheelchair-accessible house, but there’s always something a little uncomfortable about talking about his mom in front of Eddie. Ben has a fierce pride in his mother, but it always feels a little like rubbing it in Eddie’s face, so he tries not to talk about her.

The corner of Eddie’s mouth turns up. “I won’t tell,” he says, and brings in two bags. One is his black suitcase and the other is Richie’s duffel.

Ben stares at it before he realizes that he’s not just likely to spook Eddie with his transparent speculation, but that he’s also just prolonging the inevitable. He gets his backpack and Bev’s suitcase out

of the truck bed and brings them through the house and into the master bedroom.

When he sees Bev he thinks nothing so clearly as *Thank God*.

“You look comfortable,” he says.

She’s perched on the decorative pillows—the bed is made and he doesn’t usually ask the cleaning crew to do that, but he’s grateful for it in this moment—and looks like a queen. She’s taken off her sandals and tucked her knees up, so her bare toes sink into the duvet. She belongs.

Richie, perched on the end of the bed with his legs swinging like a toddler, does not.

“There’s a guest room, but it’s only a twin bed,” Ben says. Richie’s as tall as he is and he knows how uncomfortable it was to sleep in one of those for a long period of time, so maybe Eddie will take it by virtue of being shorter. “The couch is pretty big, though.” It probably will be okay on Richie’s back, low to the ground as it is.

“Eddie can have the bed,” Richie says, clearly on the same wavelength as Ben. “He’ll fit better.”

“Fuck you, old man,” says Eddie.

Eddie proceeds to bully Richie up from Ben’s bed and out of the room, which is impressive. Bev looks like she wishes she had popcorn—Ben has no popcorn, as he’s discovered that when he snacks on foods that are mostly air he starts binge-eating and can’t stop himself, but maybe he should buy her popcorn? Does she like popcorn? Much as he’s enjoying watching Bev sprawl out on his bed, Eddie is right there, and he needs to change the setting before his brain switches gears.

“Do either of you need anything? Here, come see the kitchen.”

This is the part Ben’s been thinking about since he thought about getting Bev into his space. It was probably a stupid move to have the kitchen so centrally located in the house he lives in—he knows he has issues with food, but his brain still associates *kitchen* with *oven* and

warmth, so of course he built his mother's house around those home fires. But the patio is really the focal point—the center of the house being technically outside it. Magazines just ate that up, when they weren't calling him weird for it.

He wants Bev to look at the patio so badly that he makes himself slow down, reminds himself that she'll be living here and she needs to know where things are. He walks her through where all the dishes are, opens the fridge to show her the Brita and is glad to find the whole fridge has been emptied in his absence (thank you, cleaning crew, going above and beyond as ever, he's going to have to tip them all individually), and is changing the water filter when he hears one of the doors open.

But Bev is right beside him. She turns as he does, and they watch Eddie step out back. He just leans in the doorway, and for a moment he moves his right arm at a weird angle, held tight to his body, and Ben can see the kid with the inhaler and two fanny packs superimposed on the grown man. His hair's not slicked back today, instead it's falling forward in uncontrolled swoops across his forehead, and his eyes are huge.

The day Ben met the Losers, Bill asked him to stay with Eddie while he raced off to Keene's Drugstore, and Ben listened because it was Bill Denbrough. He stayed with Eddie and completely forgot about the blood sluicing through his own shirt, and when Bill came back and Eddie was able to manage his asthma attack he immediately turned and began fussing over Ben, like he was paying him back. Eddie patched him up, outside the drugstore in the back alley, his voice frantic with *How do you amputate a waist?* and if Ben ever managed to work that out he would have over the years, but.

It's right, that Eddie looks at it first. Feels like being inducted all over again—no *Welcome to the Losers Club, asshole* but just the knowledge that the whole landscape is theirs, now.

Ben can see when the self-awareness comes back into him, because he straightens his arm out and turns to look at them watching him.

"You—uh, you built this whole thing?" He closes the door and fumbles with the handle a bit, like he's not sure whether it'll latch

shut or not.

“Yeah,” Ben says. “It had to be totally wheelchair accessible, Mom was not doing well toward the end there. But, like, she gave me a home for years, it was time to trade back.” *Now it’s time for you all to be here.*

“You built this house for your mother?” Bev asks, her voice soft.

“Yeah.” He wants to check his watch but he’s not actually wearing it; he threw it in his bag last night before he got in the shower and he never unpacked it. “Her name was Arlene, and Arlene was technically a made-up name for this opera called *The Bohemian Girl*, so.” He gestures to the house in general, trying to indicate what it means to be held by a memory. They know, he’s sure, but do they feel it here?

Bev’s voice turns teasing. “The art historians are going to think you had some kind of grand romance with a woman from the Czech Republic.”

“God, I hope not.”

Not only is the idea of art historians looking over this house just terrifying—critics are very different from historians, he doesn’t have to confront historians, and the idea of lingering long enough to become *art history* is also deeply unsettling—the grand romance of Ben’s life is just starting. He doesn’t know what he’s going to do about it, now, but his brain is already telling him that the second she tells him it’s okay, there are going to be houses, museums, research centers, wherever she’ll let him take her, and all of them are going to be *Beverly*. If a historian ever looks at him and his life, barring all the weirdness that was his absent childhood in Derry, he wants to have *Beverly Marsh* written all over him from now on.

Slow down, cowboy, he tells himself, and stretches for something to do. “I think I’m going to take a nap too,” he says, because Richie seems to have taken over his guest room with an uncharacteristic lack of commentary. “Do either of you need anything?”

Eddie requests coffee. Ben gets it out of the cabinet, shows him the kettle, the French press, and the scale, and the instructions on the

bag. When he turns around Bev is taking down mugs with the quiet confidence of someone who belongs here and owns the things inside, and Ben sees his whole future yawning out of his open cabinets so he has to go lie down.

He takes off his boots but doesn't bother undressing. He sets the alarm on his phone and closes his eyes and does not open them for twenty-six minutes. For a long time it feels like his brain is still spinning in his head, turning over *Beverly's here* over and over again like smoke in a crystal ball, but slowly he becomes less and less aware of his surroundings and goes away inside a little bit. He wakes up before the alarm goes off, feeling surprisingly well-rested, and is relieved that the reset worked.

He should get up and be present in the house for them, but he self-indulges for a moment and looks up the meaning of *Beverly* online. One website tells him it means *beaver stream*—and yeah, he feels like he should have seen that one coming, but it just won't do—but another claims it means *meadow*, which makes more sense. That's what the *-ly* suffix means, right? You see Ashleys, Oakleys, you see Stanleys, and they're some kind of grove or clearing, he's pretty sure.

There are texts from Mike, who is finally in Florida and put up in a hotel—there's a tense tone to the messages he sent just to Ben, as opposed to the group chat, about how he asked for a dollar in exchange for the title, but Ben owed him and the check should mean he's comfortable while he sorts himself out. There's Bill, reporting that he made it home to London.

Everyone's out, he thinks clearly, a wash of relief making him want to sink back into the duvet again. He forces himself to sit up, thinking of the apocalyptic rain and whatever media coverage might have happened related to the trial. He checks his Google alert for Derry, Maine, knowing even as he does it how Mike tells him that no news is ever reported in Derry, nothing ever makes it onto the state or national scale.

Not this time.

Derry is actually trending online, he discovers with some surprise, and at least it's not because of a moderately well-known comedian

being involved in killing an escaped mental patient. It's because of a flash flood warning that's been going for days now. He pulls up one of the news websites and looks at the helicopter footage.

The water is moving. It's not standing still or just accumulating, but it's driving, turning into rapids in the streets. Ben is at first too frazzled to identify individual roads he might recognize, but then he sees Bassey Park, water flowing over the bandstand. The old Kitchener Ironworks, shown from overhead, are a minefield of debris and brown water. And then it cuts to what he recognizes as the kissing bridge, just to see the water come up to the level of the road.

It's driving toward the Barrens. Ben knows that bridge, knows where the water leads, from any direction, and it's driving toward the Barrens.

He checks the news reports for evacuation notices—part of Penobscot County has been evacuated as well, though nowhere is as bad as Derry, built so that the logging camps could send felled trees downstream easily. Ben looks at a weather map and a muted newscaster explains in the captions that the water is flowing toward the coast, quite naturally for such a sudden flood.

Ben knows, with the bone-deep certainty with which he knew how to lay boards in the Barrens, that the water will take the buildings with it.

He gets up to go tell Bev and Eddie, but they're no longer in the kitchen. When he opens the man door to the garage he finds bright sunlight coming in through the open garage door. Eddie has both doors of the truck open and is fussing with something in the dashboard; he waves at Ben when he spots him. Bev is standing off to the side, watching whatever he's doing and holding two mugs of coffee in her hands. She has that look on her face again—the *this kills monsters, if you believe it does*.

He can't interrupt them in the process of killing monsters. He goes inside, sets up his laptop at the table, and waits.

Ben says, “Derry is gone.”

Bev still feels a bit grimy by association—not that Ben’s garage is unclean, but looking at the blood and watching Eddie yank the cassette player out of the dashboard left her feeling like she has a faint patina of dirt all over her. When Ben says *Derry is gone* she almost takes it as metaphorical—*we have made it, we have escaped, nothing can hurt us now*—but Ben’s expression is far from dreamy or abstract.

He has his laptop set up at the kitchen table and is perched on one of the barstools, like he might need to get up again or bolt out of the building.

It would be a pretty bold claim for him to make, if he meant it metaphorically. Ben has been so understanding this whole time, not asking her questions about the things Tom did to her or the things the tape deck snarled. It would be a pretty big unilateral statement—sure, Bev would like Derry to be gone, would like to be rid of it, but she and Eddie just dealt with the evidence that it’s still on her, still living in her head, still spouting filth. And Ben’s not the kind of man to make a statement on how other people feel without explicit consultation—Tom would declare that Bev felt one way or the other in front of guests, in front of buyers, and Bev learned by then not to contradict him in public or in private—but Ben—no. He wouldn’t say *Derry is gone* if he meant *I’m glad we’re out*, not in front of her, and not in front of Richie or Eddie.

So he has to mean literally. And there’s a terrifying concept in itself.

Eddie says, “Derry’s what?”

“Gone,” Ben replies.

Eddie looks like he’s stalling out right there in the kitchen.

“I’ll get Richie,” Bev says, quietly and seriously.

He doesn’t object; instead he starts to panic. “Do you mean that the whole town is gone? Like, we leave Maine and suddenly the town is no longer there—like, there’s never been a town here, your whole

childhood and also a disproportionately large chunk of your adult life was all a dream, you stepped into some kind of alternate reality—”

“No,” Ben says calmly. “I mean that the flash flooding means that they’ve evacuated the whole place. Come see.”

Bev goes over to the door of the guest room and knocks. “Richie?”

There’s a pause and then Richie’s voice asks, “Are you Markinson?”

“No,” Bev replies. She pauses, trying to think of the next line. “Are you Markinson?”

“No. That makes two of us. You can come in, I’m decent.”

She opens the door and he’s sprawled across a twin bed, his feet still on the floor as though he only meant to sit down and not to fall asleep. The duvet is undisturbed; its sunshine yellow seems incongruous in light of what Ben just said.

“What’s ‘a mattah, stomata?’” Richie asks, pulling out a broad New York City accent, but his eyes are careful behind his glasses.

“You better come see this,” she says.

He sits up. “Is Eddie—?”

From the kitchen Eddie’s voice climbs with a “What the fuck? *Richie!*”

“Oh, he’s fine,” Richie says, and gets up and shuffles out of the room. Bev follows him into the kitchen, watches him reach for pockets on a jacket he’s not wearing, and then fold his arms awkwardly. “What’d I do?”

Eddie turns to him and throws up his hands. “*Derry’s gone!*” His tone is slightly accusatory, as though Richie took it and hid it somewhere.

“The fuck do you mean, *Derry’s gone?*”

Bev feels the way she felt in the Townhouse, after calling Patricia Uris and hearing her cry into the phone. She just let herself behind the bar and Ben begged her to talk to him, because he picked up on

the little details that the others didn't—that Bev said *in the bath tub* before Stan's poor widow did. Ben sees everything but says very little about it—and in the kitchen, Richie and Eddie are performing the emotional equivalent of lancing a boil.

Richie repeats, “What the fuck do you mean, *Derry is gone?*”

Ben, unperturbed by the shouting going on over his head, is still sitting on the barstool in a way that has to be uncomfortable. Bev goes over to him and leans against his back, putting her hands on his shoulders, and he tilts his head back to look up at her, then settles on the seat and pulls up a video feed. Richie and Eddie lean in on either side of them.

Water the color of raw meat flows past a parking lot, up over the edge, and starts dragging cars away. Bev's hands tighten on Ben's shoulders and she gasps a little, seeing someone trying to drive out of it.

“I've been watching the news,” Ben says calmly. She wants to sink her hands into the space between his neck and shoulders, feel if there's tension there that he's hiding, but she won't in front of them. He is as bland about the apocalyptic rainfall as he was about Kay bringing a bodyguard to dinner, as he was about the scar bisecting Kay's face, and Bev knows him by now.

“It shouldn't have collected that fast,” Eddie says, peering at the footage of the Kenduskeag rising over the kissing bridge. Like he's looking for confirmation, he looks at Ben. “It can't have collected that fast, right? It's barely been two days.”

“Two days of nonstop apocalyptic rain,” Ben says, and something connects in Bev's brain.

The apocalyptic rainfall, she thought, and Ben spoke, and she knows him as well as he'll allow her to know him but she can't imagine they're in the same head yet. *The apocalyptic rainfall* sounds like *the apocalyptic rock fight* for Mike and for her, and Richie said he didn't know why he was gathering stones and Bev didn't know to what end she threw the first one, except to get Bowers off of Mike (*I always have fucking good aim*), but they all called it that when they walked

away, without consulting each other. The very same similarity of word choice that Bill warned them against when they spoke to the police, lest they be accused of conspiracy and getting their story straight. *The apocalyptic rock fight. The apocalyptic rainfall.*

The rock fight was a good thing. Dangerous, they could have died, if any child of Bev's did half the things she did when she was thirteen Bev would be outraged; but the rock fight had to happen, and it was good that they won. Seven of them all together against Bowers and his gang, and Mike not knowing who any of them were or why they'd bother to step in, but what welded them together as efficiently as doing battle together?

And if the apocalyptic rock fight was a good thing, then the apocalyptic rainfall...

"They started the evacuations yesterday," Ben says. "This footage—" He cuts himself off and shakes his head, leaning a bit into Bev's touch.

Bev feels callous and ashamed. She hates Derry, she's allowed to feel it now, it's safe to feel the revulsion of what happened there without the discomfort of knowing she'll have to go back the way she feels about Chicago. But she just saw a car getting carried away, and she didn't think once of people inside it.

If there are deaths...

None of them ever stopped for me, she thinks, resentful. *They saw me running and they all looked away.*

But was it their fault?

"Yeah, but Haystack." Richie leans forward in front of the laptop and Ben leans back to make room for him as Richie shoulders him out of place. "You said Derry was *gone*. This isn't gone. This is—apparently another Biblical plague, but the town's all under the water."

"The Flood wasn't a plague," Eddie says.

Bev looks over at him and sees how white his lips are. Eddie grew up going to church, didn't he?

“What?” Richie asks.

“The blood, the darkness, those were plagues. The Flood is just—the Flood.”

But here are the rivers turning red—not bloody, but dirt being dragged through the town. Looking at the debris—wood and trees, scraping through the streets and the water interrupting them intermittently—Bev can see it.

What kind of plague calls you a whore? Bev wonders, and is glad she didn’t speak of it, to Ben or to anyone else.

“Thank you, Dr. Kaspbrak, very illuminating.” Richie slides a little away from the space, twisting around to look at Ben. “I’m not gonna call a man out on his dramatics, but what’s the deal here?”

“Derry is gone,” Ben says in his understated quiet voice. “If you look at the weather map—” He opens up another tab. “—they’re tracking the flow of water. It’s all going toward the Atlantic. What do you thinks going to happen to the buildings, the whole city, when the water goes out. I know those houses. They weren’t meant to withstand this kind of event.”

“This kind of *event*,” Richie repeats, but it’s not mocking, he just sounds dumbfounded. “This kind of *event*, holy shit, Haystack, what kind of unnatural disasters can this house stand up to?”

Ben ignores the obvious distractor, speaking absently as he searches for the overhead map. “This is Nebraska. Everything’s flat. It’s pretty earthquake-proof, tornado-proof, and fireproof. Here.” He leans back again, his head just on Bev’s shoulder, so that they can all look at the multicolored map of Maine. There are indicative arrows and swirling whirlpools and the weather announcer looks haggard behind his TV smile.

The apocalyptic rainfall. The apocalyptic rock fight.

The first person to comment on the rock she lobbed at Bowers, far from being Mike, who was too busy spitting raw meat out of his mouth, was Stan. *Nice throw*, said this kid, and looked at her like he

was impressed.

“We need to call them,” Bev says. She means Stan, but Stan means Bill and Mike, and they need to know too. She reaches out and grabs Ben’s phone, and it lights up as soon as she lifts it but she taps the button on the side, making the screen go dark and reflective again. *Please, please, please.*

The only face she sees is her own.

She taps the button; they need Bill and Mike, of course, she didn’t really expect anything less. “What’s your passcode?” she asks as the number pad appears.

“Year I met you,” Ben replies in the same absent voice he described the safety of his house, and then his shoulders tense under her left hand.

Bev blinks, reminded that he just bought this phone in Bangor right after they reported to the hospital and the police. But he says it so easily—and Bev remembers him on the phone with Richie, giving him a passcode to get into the garage—*one-nine-eight-nine*.

“New kid,” she says. He said he didn’t remember her—he had her name in his wallet for years, but he had her in mind when he set his garage door code, too? How?

Richie interrupts. “Yes, that’s very sweet of him, to forget all about the worst summer of our collective lives excluding this one. 1989, call Mike, call Bill.”

Bev scrolls through Ben’s contacts and finds *Denbrough, Bill*. She hits the call button and puts the phone to her ear, glancing at the others. Richie has a tight anxious look on his face; Eddie’s expression has gone curiously flat; and Ben is wide-eyed.

The phone rings, and rings, and rings, and eventually says, “*You’ve reached Bill Denbrough. I can’t come to the phone right now. For inquiries about my work, please contact my publicist at—*” And then he gives a number. “*For personal matters, please leave a message.*” The voicemail beeps.

Bev can't leave a voicemail for *personal matters* in Bill Denbrough's inbox, even on Ben's phone. She curses and hangs up; he'll see Ben called later. She mutters, "*Shit*," as she clicks back to the contacts and scrolls down to *Hanlon, Mike*, but Mike is technically on the first vacation of his entire life, and if he doesn't pick up—

"Hello?" Mike says in a customer service voice.

Bev hits the speaker button and places the phone down next to Ben's laptop. She doesn't think about making a circle until she realizes she did just that. "Hey, Mike."

"Hello," Mike says, tone easier but still alert.

"You're on speaker. It's me, Ben, Eddie, and Richie. We couldn't get Bill on the line."

"You saw it?" Mike asks, and of course he was paying attention, that was his job for years—he knows the people in that town, everything he had was in his loft in the library, and while it was cordoned off for a crime scene he made do without it, but *surely* Mike has valuables that are being destroyed right now.

The apocalyptic rock fight. It was for Mike, but it was also for more than Mike. This quiet new kid behind her, suddenly letting loose with a battle cry, a barbaric yawp. It was a *fuck you* to Henry Bowers, delivered in the form of a rock.

What is the apocalyptic rainfall?

"We're looking at it right now," Ben says.

"As soon as my plane went up, we got over the clouds. Almost no turbulence. I was in, and then I was out. When did the rain stop for you?"

"Soon as we crossed state lines," Ben replies. Bev wants a cigarette, suddenly—she forgot about it until she remembered smoking one, and now her teeth and tongue itch for it.

"Not the only thing that stopped," Richie says. "I woke up and it was end-of-the-world dark, and Eddie was just chugging along in his PT

Cruiser—”

“It’s not a fucking PT Cruiser,” Eddie says.

“—can’t see a damn thing. So I put my glasses on him, and he got us out of Maine. It was like I was banned from viewing the entire state of Maine, but New Hampshire was free for a thirty-day trial period. And sorry about your car, man, but your tape deck is totally haunted, it puked blood on Benverly here.”

“You put your glasses on him?” Mike asks.

Richie reaches up and adjusts the glasses in question. “Yeah, man, once I figured out the problem wasn’t that he’d spray-painted black over them or something.”

“And it worked?”

“Yes,” Eddie says shortly.

“Your glasses,” Mike repeats, almost to himself. Bev knows what’s coming, and braces herself before Mike asks, “Bev, what made the blood stop?”

She takes a deep breath. The heel broke off that shoe and she threw them out in the hotel they stopped in that night. “I lit a cigarette,” she replies.

Richie, who used to smoke with her when they were kids, raises his eyebrows. Ben says nothing of her panicked scream, her bludgeoning the tape deck as if she could get it to shatter like the mirror. Of course he wouldn’t, but the knowledge sits there between them, alive between her palm and the back of his shirt.

Mike asks, “Anything else along that line?” Bev is pathetically grateful he isn’t asking for more details: *But what did you hear, Beverly?*

Bev looks at Richie and Eddie, trying to draw them away from the topic.

“I think Stan’s haunting Eddie’s radio,” Richie says matter-of-factly.

“And his musical tastes have not improved since 1989.”

“That’s not all,” Eddie says, blank-faced and hard voiced. Bev wonders if he’s about to confess something, and then follows his gaze to Richie.

Oh, she thinks very clearly.

Richie glares a little bit. “It is all. That was one of the screaming nightmares I told you guys about, that was all.”

And oh god, Bev had night terrors from the night she left Derry; and as an adult when she was making enough money she paid into her health insurance to see sleep specialists, but if Richie got her dreams of them all dying...

“No more head spinning around?” Mike asks.

“Not that Eddie or I noticed,” Richie says, his tone dry and unyielding —*do not push me.*

A text message comes up on the phone—just the name: *Bill Denbrough*. A notification appears on Ben’s computer as well. Ben opens up the messages window and begins copy-pasting links into it. “I’m sending him the links.”

“Ben, what have you been thinking about this?” Mike asks.

The background of the messenger app is dark gray, and Bev looks into it for reflections, but there are none.

Please tell us what you’re thinking, Bev thinks, like she can telepathically inject the thought into Ben’s head.

She used to look at Tom’s face, just to check his mood, just to see how likely he’d be to box her ear if she didn’t choose her words carefully or if she came within reach. She looks at Ben not to check for her safety but to see what’s going on with him. When he said he’d sent the post card she cried for not recognizing it, but he held her and said, *I never told you. How could you know if I never told you?* and genuinely seemed like he never expected her to look any deeper, but he’s always watching her and responding to things she never said! He

saw her wrists and, with Bev's flush of humiliation behind the bar in the Townhouse as background noise, immediately showed her his hands and made himself small.

"Yeah, Haystack, take us into your mind palace," Richie says.

"Mind palace," Ben repeats, absent voiced again. The fingers of his left hand stretch out on the countertop alongside the laptop; Bev reaches down and lowers her hand over it, and intertwines their fingers. It's a stretch because his hands are so much bigger than hers, but she can stand it. Ben's thumb rubs across the knuckle on her index finger. Slowly he says, "Well, for starters, I didn't see anything about any dead kids."

"I noticed that too," says Mike.

"And if we hurt It, instead of killing It, or if there's another It out there—"

"Why the fuck would there be another It out there?" Richie interrupts, his voice panicked.

Bev looks at Eddie, sees the way his eyes have gone flat, and knows that he knows. There's always another It out there—the existence of one opens up the possibility of more, because things happen over and over again. Bev's been living in the cycle, returning back to a scared little girl as soon as she met Tom in that bar, and she misses the firebrand she used to be with the slingshot. She thinks of Eddie, covered in sludge and shrieking *I'm gonna kill you!* and then the almost demoralized tone with which he described his job as a risk analyst. He knows. She showed him her burn; he spoke about what he was allowed and not allowed to eat. There's always another.

She shrugs, slowly, but Eddie doesn't seem to notice. He's got his thousand-yard stare on, and it's grim, holding his arm at the broken angle again.

"I saw something," Ben says slowly. His thumb strokes across her finger again, faster. "Before my flashlight battery went out." When he takes a deep breath Bev can feel his shoulders rise and lift her slightly, with how she's leaning over him. "I think we destroyed—at

least most of them, but.” Another deep breath. “There were eggs.”

I don't think I'm ever going to eat crab legs or caviar again, he said.

Into the little silence that statement solicits—*because It was a She in the end, and Shes create life! And what does that mean for you, Bevvy? You with your Kotex and your Always and your tampons dropped into the little bin in public restrooms, and your little green pills punched out of their tinfoil trays?*

She had a scare once, afraid that her period came so late, and thought of a baby in the house with Tom, and went out and bought Vitamin C tablets and started boiling parsley because she couldn’t give him a child and if he found out she’d had an abortion he’d kill her. And he watched her do that and when she said it was a cleanse he just laughed and told her she only looked fat because she was so short. And after twenty-four hours of drinking green juice and swallowing supplements that gave her a headache, a little blood blurred out against the blue pattern in the bottom of the pad, and she put her head between her knees and thanked god for the thing she hated.

It just never happened for us, she said when Bill asked if anyone at the table had kids, and when he tried to ask her what her husband was like she changed the subject.

Richie says, his voice quavery, “I’m going to—”

Eddie comes awake and interrupts, “Yep,” and takes a step back. Bev leans forward to be out of Richie’s way and Richie lunges across the kitchen and throws up in the sink. Eddie follows him, puts a hand on his back, and asks, “Ben—washcloths or something?”

Ben is a wall of warmth all down Bev’s left side—he turns carefully and points toward a drawer, mouth opening to speak.

Richie says, “Don’t.”

Bev turns and looks at the microwave, the shiny plastic door, and sees three shapes reflected where only Richie and Eddie stand. And then there are two. And then there are three.

“Don’t be afraid,” Stan says, as Richie gasps. “Oh, very fucking helpful, Stan, because that has worked so well for the rest of my life.”

Ben’s hand comes up and rests on Bev’s shoulder, and she glances back down at him. The touch is gentle, but also like he needs something to hang on to. She puts her hand on his and looks back at the microwave—two shadows, then three, then two.

“Stan?” says Mike on the line. “Stan? Stanley, can you hear me?”

That’s right. That’s right, it’s not just the four of them in the room, it’s five, it’s six, and if Mike is listening that means the only one they need is—

“Bill,” Stan says. There are three reflections in the microwave door, and slowly one turns to look at Bev as though through a mirror, backwards. Richie is still being sick and Eddie is yanking open drawers and wetting rags, but Bev is convinced that, across the room, Stan is looking at her. *“Bad reception. Need—”* And then Richie collapses.

Bev lets go of Ben and leans across the counter to see if he’s still conscious, and Ben gets up at the same time, as the only one in the room who has even a chance of lifting Richie.

Mike says, “Stan? Stan?”

“Stanley can’t come to the phone right now,” Richie says, definitely aware and with his personality powered on. “Can I take a message?”

Eddie rolls his eyes and applies a wet rag to the back of Richie’s neck, his mouth a line. Bev glances back at the microwave—it’s just Richie and Eddie again. Stan is gone.

“Shit,” Mike says. “What did he say?”

“Need Bill,” Bev says. It’s not the order Stan said it in, but it was the same thought she was having at the moment—the way Ben said *apocalyptic rain*. “Bad reception, need Bill.” She goes into her pocket and pulls out her flip phone. Maybe one phone call from Ben, Bill will wait and call back later—but a second call is an emergency.

The line crackles. Mike says, “Not me. He didn’t ask for me. It works over the phone, guys, it works if we’re far apart. Whatever’s calling Stan back, it’s not Derry, it’s us. it’s all seven of us.” Bev knew it, she knew it, she knew it. “We have to get Bill on the phone.”

Ben turns a solemn look on her and Bev holds her phone to her ear, nodding. She looks at the microwave, at the reflection, waiting as the dial tone rings in her ear.

He picks up this time. “Hello?”

“Bill?” she says, though she knows it’s him.

“Hey. Is everything all right?”

Bev thinks of the tone Mike used when he picked up, the customer service voice. “Yes,” she says, though *all right* isn’t quite it. “Yes, I’m sorry to bother you, but it’s important that we talk soon. It’s important that *all seven of us* talk soon.”

Bill is not stupid; he listens and then he says, “Okay.”

“Ben sent you some news stories,” Bev goes on.

“Hang on.” There’s a pause and then she hears Bill curse, muffled, as though far away. “Yeah, I see it. I see it. Okay.” A little click on the line—not like there’s another call on this phone number that nobody but the Losers and Kay knows Bev has, but like Bill is swallowing something down.

She waits. There’s no additional reflection, no Stan in the microwave, but Bev can imagine him now. The way he appeared over her shoulder, looking shocked, and said, *Nice throw*.

Bill says, “Give me five hours. That’s all I need. Just—five hours.”

“Yes,” Bev says. “We can do that. Later. That’s fine.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Me to Ben and Bev: Now?

Them: If not now...

Me: Yeah, yeah, I get it.

Okay--references are to "If Not Now..." by Tracy Chapman, to *Titanic* (king of the world), to "Please Don't Go, Girl" by New Kids on the Block, to "My Heart Will Go On" by Celine Dion (which Ben will never sing but would actually be not bad at, I think, if he could get past his embarrassment). Variant definitions of "Beverly" provided by [Behind The Name](#) and by a photoset circulating around on tumblr (link if I find it later). Richie and Bev quote *A Few Good Men*, because sometimes my parents ask each other if they're Markinson, and then Richie makes, of all things, a plant cell joke. I have no excuse.

9. Out of Time

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben does dinner. Bev does drinks.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello hello! This chapter was much easier than the last one, though apparently I'm conditioned now so I need nap breaks between writing perspectives. This chapter is also a bit longer than the rest of them, mostly because I needed to get the whole drunken seance on the screen. I think that this was Chapter 6 or so in Eddie Lives, but we're up to Chapter 9 now, so I genuinely have no idea how long this project is going to turn out to be.

Content warnings: Discussions of Richie vomiting (again). Ben thinks of canonical homophobic rumors that circulated when he went home from the Red Wheel alone every night, but he's indifferent to them and glad for Ricky Lee's shared indifference. Ben has food issues that are pretty high profile in this chapter. Richie makes a joke about eating kosher. Ben needs therapy. Bev still feels guilty about kissing Bill, and a little mad at Bill for his infidelity (because I'm mad at Bill for his infidelity). Uh, continued bad self-image, self-loathing, etcetera; mentions of suicide (Stan); mentions of intimate partner violence (as usual).

Ben takes them to the Red Wheel.

They go in Eddie's car, because Ben's the only one who knows the directions to this road house (after all these years he could probably drive there in his sleep), and the Escalade will seat four people.

The truck still needs to be scrubbed out and looked over. As Ben waits for Eddie to lean across the driver's seat and unlock the

passenger door, he looks at the smashed tape deck on the poured concrete. *Please don't let that ruin a thing she liked*, he thinks.

Bev sits in the back and Richie lays with his head in her lap. Ben genuinely does not mind the vomiting in his sink, but he finds it reminds him of his mother's chemo cycles, which he did not know his brain had hung onto. Richie folds up spiky in the narrow space, and Eddie rolls his eyes, walks around, and sits in the passenger seat.

Driving back through Hemingford Home makes Ben's chest ache. It's not that he walked away without intention of ever seeing it again; it feels the way that visiting one of his own buildings feels. He puts so much time and thought into it, and then he packs up and goes and leaves it for other people to enjoy. And in all honesty, he wasn't sure he'd ever come back from Derry, and he walked out of the Red Wheel that night and felt he was telegraphing it in every swaying step. The horrified look on Ricky Lee's face told him how he was coming off, but he couldn't stop.

When they park, Ben is cautious of questions—*why do you drive so far to go to an old road house? In this hick town?*

But Richie's asleep and Eddie would never and Bev just smiles. "This is your place, huh?" she asks. Her bare shoulders are pressed up against the door and her hair is vibrant against the blue sky.

Orange and blue, he thinks. And then: *What are we hoping to find out?*

"This is my place," he says.

Richie's as steady on his feet as he ever is when he gets out of the car, leaning on Eddie and then trailing after Ben. "You got the real country boy thing going on, Haystack," he says, but he sounds almost impressed. He holds the door, too. "Didn't you go to school in California?"

"Don't try to change me, Trashmouth," Ben says. What's Ricky Lee going to say when he shows up with three people and one of them calls him *Haystack*?

Ben did go to school in California. He wonders if he and Richie were

ever there are the same time. Big state, no reason to assume their paths ever crossed, but he's traveled a lot since then, and he's been to Los Angeles. The idea that he could have run into one of the Losers on his travels and just—remembered everything there, on a sidewalk while he was on a job, is both appealing and frightening.

He could have had people, all this time. But now he knows at what cost.

Ricky Lee looks up when they come in and smiles even broader than he ever has. “Mr. Hanscom!” For as long as Ben is *Mr. Hanscom* and not *Ben*, Ricky Lee will be Ricky Lee and not Ricky. And then he comes around from the bar, strides across the restaurant, and hugs Ben as hard as Bill did, when they met up at the courthouse. A little stunned, Ben pats him on the back. “Christ, I didn’t think I’d ever see you again!”

“Sorry to scare you, Ricky Lee.” He lets go of Ben and Ben takes a slight step back, indicating his company. Bev is smiling at the exchange and he feels curiously embarrassed by it. “A table tonight?” They could certainly take over the bar, but if part of the goal of the evening is to get Richie hammered, Ben’s going to do it in a way that means Richie’s not going to die of alcohol poisoning.

Ricky Lee only smiles, looking at Ben’s company. “Yes, sir, right this way.” He grabs four sets of silverware from the host station, and then a stack of menus, and leads them to a table in the center of the restaurant. The bar is just behind them. Ben feels as though he is thinking precisely one step out of the box. “You get caught up in Colorado?”

It takes him a moment to remember the Colorado contract, since the last thing he really worked on was the Hong Kong proposal. “Oh, not Colorado. I’ve lost that contract by now, I’ll bet.” Ben’s been in some contact with his assistant, but Joey’s been very good about Mr. Hanscom’s sudden sabbatical, excusing it as one of those things creative types do. He’s not going to give Ricky Lee the full gory details, but he’s not going to lie to him either. “Got into some legal trouble in Maine, had to help a friend out. Ricky Lee—” He almost wants to grab the man by the shoulders and turn him to look at Bev, but he resists the urge. “—this is Ms. Beverly Marsh.”

Bev smiles. Her hair's a little wild from where it's been pressed up against the glass window of the car, and Ben ought to give her his jacket or something because it's cold outside, but she is as beautiful as ever. The sense of refinement he got the first time he saw her in the parking lot (*is there a password?*) is subtler. The same way she fits in Mike's old truck, Bev fits in the Red Wheel.

Ricky Lee's eyes are wide.

You should see her with a slingshot or a spear, Ben thinks, and then, because he's not showing off what he brought home but introducing his friend to his friends, says, "And this is Eddie Kaspbrak. You might know Richie Tozier here, he's America's worst comedian."

Richie laughs with the genuine delight being insulted seems to spark in him. "Oh-ho! Haystack gets off a good one. Beat Eds here right to it."

Fuck, Haystack. But Ricky Lee is still looking at Bev, brow creasing. He looks up at Ben. "A girl named Beverly," he says.

Yes. That's how Ben described her the night he tried the lemon trick —*a girl named Beverly saved my life*.

Bev accepts it graciously. "For a certain value of girl, anyway," she says.

Well, a woman named Beverly saved Ben's life too.

"Of course, ma'am," Ricky Lee says. This is rural Nebraska, but Ricky Lee's a good sort—never responded to the speculation that Ben might be gay when he went home by himself night after night, calls everyone from the old ladies who come in here for dinner with their families to the little girls in Disney shirts *ma'am*, once showed Ben a photo of his sons playing tea parties with their little sister and only laughed that they let the toddler boss them around.

It's just as well that it's all but empty in here at the moment. They're earlier than the early birds, but Ricky Lee still asks, "You drinking the usual tonight, or are you celebrating, Mr. Hanscom?"

Celebrating is not the right word, but Ben's not here to get drunk. He

looks to Bev, waiting for her to order.

"I'll have a screwdriver, please," she says. "Whatever vodka you have."

"Yes, ma'am," Ricky Lee says. Ben knows that she'll get the top vodka the way that he gets the top whiskey—for you, *Mr. Hanscom, I think it's Wild Turkey*. He smiles a little, watching Ricky Lee turn to Eddie. "And for you, sir?"

"Just water," Eddie says. "I'm driving us back."

Ricky Lee has never had confirmation that Ben has friends, and Ben can feel his delight that not only are they dining together, they're *carpooling* together. "You in town for a while?" he asks.

It might come across as interfering, from anyone else. But Ricky Lee has told Ben all about his family, and Ben never meant to be mysterious, he just didn't have much to say in return. Eddie looks to Ben.

"Ms. Marsh here, for an indefinite time," Ben says, glancing at Bev to confirm that's all right to say. She's smiling at him a little, a sort of knowing look in her eyes. He loves her.

"Three days, with option to renew," Richie says nonsensically.

Ben lets his gaze flick across the table and inclines his head in Richie's direction. "And that one's getting on the road as soon as he decides to go back to Los Angeles where he belongs."

"We're only supposed to be here overnight," Eddie says. He looks at Ben. "I don't know. Maybe that'll change."

Depends on how fucked up this whole evening goes, but Ben doesn't mind. He wants to have Bev in his space, but—and this is the great thing—there will be time for that. *And indeed there will be time*, and there will be all manner of spaces if she allows it, and if she lets him build her a house there will be guest rooms. The Losers' Club Bed and Breakfast, almost. Three or four spare rooms, depending on whether or not Richie and Eddie ever sort their shit out.

Ben nods, telling Eddie it's okay. They can stay as long as they need to.

Ricky Lee looks at him for his drink order. Ben says, "That'll be a Wild Turkey for me, Ricky Lee." It's not quite a celebration, but a toast feels called for.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hanscom."

"Beer," Richie orders, helpful as ever. Ricky Lee rattles off their list of what's on tap—Richie's eyebrows slide up his face and he looks to Ben for help.

"Give him my usual," Ben says. He's not gonna make the man drink PBR (which Ben has been known to do, from time to time), but only because he knows Richie would give him shit for it.

"Very good, very good," Ricky Lee says. "And are you dining in today, or just celebrating?"

Ben wonders why Ricky Lee thinks they're celebrating something and then realizes it's because he's smiling. Even as he goes back and forth with Richie, he's smiling; and Bev's here, looking at him, and they definitely come across like a group of people with something to celebrate. The hugging in the parking lot of the Jade of the Orient and meeting up in the private room felt a lot like this—*I need to know you before we can do this, I need to have us back*—and the badness came later, but this is Ben's space, and he doesn't think the Red Wheel can surprise him.

"We're—" He begins, ready to explain that it's just a visit, hopefully one of many, but he doesn't want to dim this feeling—the *I get to have this* comfort that soaked into his bones as soon as he sat down. He changes his mind. "You know, I don't think I've ever eaten here before. But that one—" He points at Richie. "—needs some food in his stomach, and I'm gonna let him eat on my dime tonight."

Predictably, Eddie balks. "You don't have to—"

Ben looks at him, smiles, and shakes his head. *Don't even try it.* Eddie falls silent. Bev sets one elbow on the table, her hand on her cheek,

and just smiles.

“Sounds good, Mr. Hanscom.” And it sounds like Ricky Lee means it, like he’s happy to have Ben back and bringing this wild gang, known to cuss like sailors and fool around at the table, into his restaurant at two in the afternoon. “I’ll just give you a moment with the menus?”

“That’d be great.” Ben has never eaten here before. He’s watched people eat, but he’s never so much as ordered fries at the bar; he drinks and he gets out. The idea makes his stomach go tight and then, looking at Bev as she picks up her menu, slowly relax.

Halfway back to the bar, Ricky Lee turns around. “Mr. Hanscom?”

Ben raises his chin.

“A shot of Turkey, or...?” His eyebrows are raised, all polite inquiry without judgment.

Oh god, don’t ever let Ben drink like that in front of Beverly. “Yeah, just a shot,” Ben says. What would Ricky Lee do if all four of them ordered lemons and started squeezing them into their nostrils? He was freaked out enough when Ben did it; and Ben means never to drink like that again in his life.

Well, he might understand the kind of people we are a little better, Ben muses.

Richie leans forward. “How much drinking do you do, man?”

Yeah, Ben’s really been putting it away for as long as this gang has seen him. “I’m here like once a week,” he allows. He has three beers and then he goes; it’s a habit, but he’s had worse habits.

“Because you’ve seduced the waiter,” Richie says seriously, his voice low enough Ricky Lee probably doesn’t hear.

Bev jerks with sudden, silent laughter. Ben feels much the same—the idea of him seducing anyone is just... incredible.

Eddie hits him. “Don’t. He’s just doing his job.”

“I call it like I see it, man. *Mr. Hanscom.*”

Yeah, Ben sees a lot of things too, *Trashmouth*. He rolls his eyes. “I gave him my last silver dollars. Man probably thought I was going away to die.” Eddie’s eyebrows lift, but he says nothing. “And he’s married with three kids, don’t make this weird, man.”

“Oh, of everything going on in our entire lives, *I make things weird.*”

“Yes,” everyone else at the table says at the same moment.

Richie acts maligned, putting up his hands and leaning back.

Beverly asks, “So you’ve never had the food here?”

“No,” Ben says. “But it’s good. I trust Ricky Lee.” He wouldn’t take Bev just anywhere—well, they’ve been to a bunch of shitty diners in Maine, and eaten at several rest areas on the trip out, but not when he’s trying to show her the kind of life out here. “And I, uh, see people order.”

He looks at the menu and immediately his mouth floods with saliva. *It’s fine*, he tells himself. *You’re not gonna question what they eat, you want Bev to get whatever she wants.* Bev could order four appetizers and two desserts and Ben would watch her eat them if it took her six hours, and he would smack Richie’s hand if it came near any of her plates. *Don’t overthink it.*

It’s a road house. He’ll get steak. It’s fine.

“I kind of want shrimp,” Bev says speculatively.

Richie raises his eyebrows at her. “You get all your seafood in the Midwest?”

“You cannot walk twenty feet in Chicago without being offered a lobster roll,” Bev asserts.

Richie cracks up at that.

“Whatever you want,” Ben says.

Ricky Lee comes back with their drinks and places a basket of rolls on the table. They smell sweet. “Need a few more minutes?” he asks.

Eddie makes an overwhelmed noise. He’s staring down at his menu and his eyes are *huge*.

Ricky Lee laughs. “Let me know if you have any questions.” He goes back behind the bar.

Richie starts drinking. “Hey, if I’m expecting to get possessed by a Jewish ghost later, is it a dick move to eat pork?”

Eddie rolls his eyes.

“Richie,” Bev says.

“I’m just asking!”

“Means you shouldn’t get anything with both meat and cheese, either,” Ben says absently. There are multiple steaks to choose from, and one of them comes with a skewer of shrimp, and if Bev *might* want shrimp but might want something else, he’ll totally order that and give her the shrimp.

“Yeah, I don’t love Stan that much,” Richie says, and then shoves an entire bread roll in his mouth.

“You are an abomination,” Eddie says.

“I don’t have the southern hospitality thing going for me.”

“One, this is Nebraska. Two, including Stan, you live further south than any of us.”

Richie frowns, visibly trying to pull up a map in his head. “Is L.A. further south than Atlanta?”

“Yes,” Eddie says.

“Mike’s in Florida now,” Ben reminds them.

“Watch watch watch.” Richie leans in to the table. “Eddie, what’s

further south, Los Angeles or Mike Hanlon?”

Eddie sets his menu down and gives him an incredulous look. “Mike,” he says, and the *you idiot* is clear in his tone.

“But *where* in Florida is he?”

“He went to Orlando, numbnuts, he told us that.”

“He did tell us that,” Bev agrees.

“Look, Eddie’s got a magic GPS in his brain,” Richie says. “How long a drive is it from where Mike is to Los Angeles?”

Eddie’s eyes roll up toward the ceiling, thinking. “Like, thirty-seven, thirty-eight hours.”

Bev frowns.

Richie points at Ben. “Check it.”

“Everyone knows that,” Eddie says.

Bev says, “*Ehhh*,” long and slow, in a *not so much* tone.

“Everyone does *not* know that, check it,” Richie says.

Ben rolls his eyes, pulls up the GPS on his phone, and checks the distance between Orlando, Florida, and Los Angeles, California.

“Everyone knows that, you’re just the idiot who doesn’t know that Florida is further south than California!” Eddie protests.

Ben’s phone calculates. “Thirty-six hours,” he reads.

Richie turns back to Eddie, elbows on the table and hands splayed, all *see*?

“Why thirty-seven?” Ben asks.

Eddie looks at him, visibly thrown off.

“It’s pretty specific,” Ben says. “People default to threes, fives, sevens,

twelves—you could have gone with thirty-six, if you were just making an estimate, but you said thirty-seven, thirty-eight. Why?"

"That's—" Eddie shrugs, his expression deeply discomfited and his scar suddenly very visible with how he's turned towards Ben. "That's how long it takes. Richie says he's six-two and he's a fucking liar, he's six-one."

"Like you can tell the difference, shortstack," Richie says.

"I am *not short*, that's *how tall you are*."

"Everyone looks the same height to me," Bev sighs. She knots her hands together and stretches her shoulders; she had coffee when they got in the house, but she didn't take a rest.

"Even Bill?" Richie asks.

Bev rolls her eyes. "No, Richie, we're all very clear that you're much taller than Bill."

Ben scrolls down on his phone app. The two alternate routes available to him, traveling from Orlando to Los Angeles, are each thirty-seven hours. The difference in distance is within twenty miles. He puts his phone away.

Mike said, *It's us. Whatever's calling Stan back, it's not Derry, it's us. It's all seven of us.*

Bev seeing the dead in Derry is one thing, and Richie doing voices—Richie's always done voices, standing behind Eddie as Ben sat on a crate outside Keene's Drugstore and urging him along in just the worst British accent—but didn't Eddie lead them out of the tunnels, the last time, when they were kids? When they couldn't find the way back to the well and came out in the Barrens, right by where they'd flooded it the first day Ben met them?

"I'm getting shrimp," Bev announces, and folds her menu.

"Hey," Ben says, quietly. Everyone looks at him. He raises his whiskey. "We got out." He's thinking of the tunnels, thinking of finding Bev's hand in the dark.

Eddie looks at him, and then raises his water glass.

They toast quietly, understatedly, and Richie chugs the rest of his beer like he's a college student and not a grown man.

Ricky Lee comes back around and Ben hurriedly orders the first steak he sees on the menu, and then has a brief panic about sides before he realizes he can throw a salad on there and some broccoli. Bev orders shrimp with a side of shrimp (he loves her), and Eddie, looking a little wild-eyed, stammers out his order and glances at Ben as though to make sure it's okay. Ben nods. Something about Eddie's eyes is familiar to him—the whole world opening up in front of him and ready for devouring.

It's fine, Ben tells himself. *With them, it's fine*.

Richie orders a pulled pork sandwich and then smirks when everyone rolls their eyes at him. Ricky Lee, nonplussed, looks at Ben as if to check if this is a trap, and Ben just shakes his head to tell him it's fine.

Ben switches to water. He watches Bev slide her grilled shrimp off her skewer and pinch her breaded shrimp by the tails. She likes shrimp, she likes short ribs, she likes eggs benedict. He doesn't have even a little bit of food in the house. He's going to have to learn how to cook for people who enjoy eating, not just grilling chicken breasts to parcel out into salads.

She catches him watching her. "Wanna try?" she asks, holding up a shrimp.

"Uh—sure," he manages.

She holds the shrimp out to him by the tail and he carefully, awkwardly, leans in and bites it, a little afraid of putting his teeth down on her fingers.

Richie makes exaggerated cooing noises. Bev flips him off. Ben draws back, chewing. The shrimp is breaded and peppery, and the cocktail sauce seems to coat his tongue, but not in a bad way.

"Good?" Bev asks.

I would let you feed me rat poison, Ben thinks very clearly, but also he is a human being so he just nods. It is good. Good has never been the problem, it's that he doesn't get to have good things (anymore), but if Bev wants to share with him he'll take whatever she gives him.

"Why the fuck have you never eaten here before?" Eddie demands. Whatever he's eating, it's smothered in queso and served on rice and black beans.

Ben swallows "I accepted iceberg lettuce into my heart," he says dryly.

Richie gives him a once-over from the other side of the table, then raises his beer. "Not worth it, man," he says, and drinks.

"It's called impulse control, Richie," says Eddie.

Richie lowers his glass. "How's that working out for you?"

"Fucking delicious," Eddie says fiercely, cutting another bite.

Bev giggles a little.

Ricky Lee comes back to check on them. "Everything okay?"

"The verdict is, it's fucking delicious," Richie drawls. Ben's a little surprised when Eddie just nods along, mouth full of rice and beans.

Ricky Lee grins. "Glad to hear it." He looks at Ben. "What do you think?"

"It's good," Ben says honestly, because it is. Maybe it's less that he doesn't get to have good things, because this whole meal is a good thing, having Bev and Richie and Eddie in the Red Wheel with him is a good thing, being back in this space with the peanut shells and the jukebox in the corner is a good thing, the fact that the people he loves are with him and seem to be enjoying the way he spends his time is a good thing. He looks at Bev, who is steadily working her way through her plate, and thinks, *Was it worth it?*

And for her, maybe the answer is no. If she had to get hurt to be with him, fuck that, he'd rather she live some happy life elsewhere and

never saw him again after 1989—but maybe what Ben gets is one good moment, sandwiched between the years and years of absence of feeling and then the terror. He should enjoy it while it lasts. He knows something's coming next, though he may not know what.

Bev looks up. “It’s very good,” she tells Ricky Lee. There are crumbs of breading on her lips, pale brown against her red lipstick, and after a moment she looks back at her plate and licks them free, tongue darting out so quickly Ben could have missed it.

Bev and Eddie split a dessert. “It’s the last of the summer special,” Ricky Lee says. “The next is going to be s’mores style.”

Oh god, it’s been actual decades since Ben had a s’more. He vanishes quickly into a fantasy in which he and Bev are at some campsite. There’s a fire in front of them and a dog (nondescript but large, in his mind’s eye) lying down in front of one of their log benches, and Bev’s tongue is poking out of her mouth as she squints down a skewer at an actual on-fire marshmallow.

He wants to laugh at himself. “Do you like marshmallows?” he asks Bev.

“I do like marshmallows,” Bev says.

He allows himself one spoonful of the grilled peaches and cream—it is fantastic, sweet and tart and delicious—and then sets his spoon down. He spends half of the dish watching Bev eat, and then half of it exchanging glances with her while Richie flirts determinedly with Eddie and Eddie gives him shit for it.

A good thing, Ben thinks. Just hang onto it. As long as you get to have it, hang onto it.

Ben puts on pajamas for the séance.

Bev, feeling comfortably full and indulged, flags him down as he’s passing the kitchen. She’s collecting glasses so that they can drink—Ben might not have food, but he has vodka and he has gin, and Eddie likes gin, so she gets that down too.

"Hey," she says, hands on the counter, leaning back to look at him.

He changes course immediately, but it takes some coaxing to get him around the counter, and then she has to put her hands on his and guide them to her hips. Once he works out what she wants he goes with it, though, stepping into her space and leaning down for her kiss when she reaches up for it.

When she pulls back he asks, "What was that for?"

"You're sweet," she replies.

He only had the one drink with dinner; the flush on top of his cheeks is all hers. "Am I?"

"Yeah." She tilts her head back to make him kiss her again, and he does. His beard rubs her cheek, rough in contrast to how soft his mouth is.

He smiles a little when she pulls back this time. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She sounds drunk, but she's not; she's just relaxed and glad to be here, glad to be like this, feeling like a lovesick teenager.

His smile widens. "How sweet?" he teases.

Unexpected, her core goes suddenly hot. Liquor does that to her, her first drink makes her tingle down her arms and between her thighs, but it's been at least an hour, so that's for him, too. "Mmm," she says, leaning in for another kiss. Despite how she's feeling it doesn't get hot, just sweet and warm and close in his kitchen—she shouldn't want to play house after what living in her house was like, but everything is so different with him. She's different with him, and she likes it, and it's not just *allowed*, it's *good*.

From the other room they hear Eddie say, "I hope Ben throws you out."

"It was your idea," Richie retorts.

Ben pulls back and they stare at each other for a long moment, before they both break down laughing.

"Oh, I don't want to know that they're doing," Ben sighs, taking a step back. "I'm gonna get changed."

She holds up one of the empty glasses. "I'm gonna tend bar." It's presumptuous to just take his dishes out of their cabinets like they belong to her, but she knows he doesn't mind.

He looks at her, his eyes very soft.

Ben's study and guest room is much smaller than his bedroom as a child, but parts of it remind Bev irresistibly of walking in and seeing all the papers, drawings, and news stories tacked on the walls. It was the first time she was in the bedroom of a boy her own age, the first time since she was six or seven and having playdates with classmates whose moms who could watch her after school while both her parents were at work. She even checks behind the door for a New Kids on the Block poster, but there's nothing there.

There is a drafting table and bulletin board with what looks like incomplete sketches—rooms that fade away into nothing, or different shapes that look roughed out rather than carefully measured. One of the images is just a print-out of a small brown bowl with a celadon green lacquer inside.

She hasn't seen much of his handwriting since Derry—just the old postcard—but there's something familiar in the stroke of each line.

Been a while since you drew, Bevy, she tells herself, and then turns back around to focus on the computer screen. She dreams about draping fabric; the shapes she sees in her head look like Mucha sketches more than anything that people would buy to wear. She missed her old white blouses, the ones Tom told her she looked stupid in but are coming back into fashion, crisp and light and with accents around the collar. She bought three in Derry and rotated through them the entire time they were there, and at some point she ought to take her court clothes out and soak the blood off her blouse and jacket.

She turns and sets the glasses down on the computer desk, then holds the bottles up in Eddie's direction. "You partaking?"

Eddie sighs, nods and holds out his hand for a glass. Bev pours him gin, and Richie vodka, and then sits down on the end of the bed.

Ben comes in with a handful of envelopes and a salad bowl. “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” he says as he passes the bowl over to Richie. “And that’s why this is my cheapy salad serving dish.”

“You sure know how to treat a guy,” says Richie, and then sighs.

Bev swirls her glass and watches the vodka go around. Centrifugal or centripetal force, one of the two. It’s been her drink of choice since college, since she was drinking screwdrivers in her college dorm room and her roommate was challenging her to take shots of Fireball. Vodka looks clean. She thinks she read that somewhere—the clean look of it—and it’s stuck with her since.

Ben sits down in the chair at the desk and sets up Skype. The music plays, and Ben clicks the button and Bill appears on the screen, frowning into the camera. The resolution is not good; he’s definitely in some kind of study with bookshelves behind him. The delay means it takes him a moment to relax and smile.

“Hey, guys,” he says.

He’s alone.

“Hi, Bill,” they say almost in unison.

“Are we waiting on Mike?”

Ben checks his phone. “He should come in shortly. He says he’s having trouble getting the wifi to cooperate.”

Richie drains his shot. Bev leans down, picks up the bottle from the floor, and pours him another.

Mike calls in next. He’s definitely sitting in front of a laptop. “Okay, I signed up for a free trial of xfinity, so wish me luck. This better work.” Bev winces in sympathy.

“Cable companies wait for no... séance,” Richie attempts.

Bev pats the pack of his hand.

“So what’ve you got, Mike?” Ben asks.

“I’ve been thinking about the things we remember,” Mike says. “And the way that works. Bill, you got the thing I asked for?”

A slight delay, and then Bill says, “Got it,” and gets up and out of the frame. The camera toward the left—Bev winces again, since looking at moving cameras has always made her a little motion sick—to show a corkboard much like Ben. Bill stands in front of it, adjusting one of many white index cards pinned to it. There’s blurry writing on each of them, but Bev can’t make it out.

Oh, Bev thinks. It’s awfully methodical, considering the extremely improvised way she’s been addressing Stan, by mirrors and faith alone. She looks down into her vodka, watching for the round reflection of the overhead light, but she sees no people reflected in it. She lowers her glass and moves it around, feeling a bit like she’s shining a flashlight around a darkened attic, but she can’t find him.

Mike begins. “So the way I see it, we’ve got three moving parts. We have the Turtle, we have It, and we have Stanley.”

Everyone turns to look at Richie. Richie glances back and forth, and then shrugs. Bev raises her glass and looks through the refracted little shapes, seeing Richie’s hair and Eddie’s eyes and Ben’s cheek distorted.

She looks up in time to see Mike shrug. “We have to think about who did what, and when. And the things that happened are—the ways It chased us around that summer—”

“And this summer.”

“Yes, thank you, Richie, we were there. And the skyrocketing amount of success all you had for leaving Derry. And the way you all forgot each other, until I called. And the Ritual of Chüd. And the deadlights. And then Richie channeling Stan. Then the rain.”

Bev mouths, *The apocalyptic rainfall.*

“You got all that, Big Bill?” Mike asks.

Bill reaches across the bulletin board, touching index cards in sequence. “Yep. Makes more sense than mapping out a novel, I’ll tell you that.”

“The eggs,” Ben says. He twitches, like he didn’t mean to say it. He raises his voice a little and says, his tone steadier: “Don’t forget about the eggs.”

Bev takes a deep breath.

“But the eggs happened almost at the end.” It threw them down after Eddie hurt It, when It was fleeing, and Bill and Richie went after It. Mike says, “Bill, what happened first?”

Bill blinks. “God, that was a long time ago.” He grimaces. “I found the book in the library.”

“Yes,” says Mike.

Ben nods.

“And I learned about the Ritual of Chüd. And then we went in to fight It, and I saw...”

Bev remembers *I’m not afraid of you, and you will be*, and waking up almost falling onto Ben. The deadlights were like nothing at all, and also seeing everything that would ever happen—dreams she had for the rest of her life, so her memory of hours in the deadlights is skewed by years of sleep. She never saw what Bill saw—but she saw Bill.

She didn’t know it was Bill at the time. She saw a man buying a gun.

“I missed the deadlights, the first time. Bev—” Bev startles. “—you were in, but I missed. And I saw the Turtle. I went past the turtle. And he said...”

Bill smiles, sudden and white and pixelated. Bev feels something—a wave of relief, or nostalgia. Something like she thought she was looking for, when they kissed in the Townhouse. That was—thinking

she had something in hand, like closing her fist on the rung of ladder and it suddenly dissolving under her palm.

“He said, ‘Cosmological shit like this, you got to throw away the instruction manual.’”

The corner of Ben’s mouth creeps up in a smile. “Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“No,” Eddie says. He waves his glass, then holds it up a little to peer at Bev over the rim. “No. You understand—you told me. You said that the spear—” He mimes throwing his glass. Ben leans back a little bit, alarmed. “—you said that it kills monsters, if you believe it does.”

She did. She did say that, and it worked, when she smashed the mirror. And Eddie threw the javelin and he believed it—and he almost died.

“Yes,” Bill says. “Yes, that’s why I was weaker this time, I wasn’t a kid, I didn’t believe.”

Bev looks around at the camera, nonplussed. They didn’t believe, that time that they cornered It in the bathroom of the Neibolt house. When Richie shouted out *It’s the Teenage Werewolf!* it was a lie, but it was what he saw. They didn’t believe, when Bev hit it with their two slugs, that she had another hidden in the cup of the slingshot. But they believed they could make It believe she did, and the boys were all screaming, *Kill It, Bev!* And Bill looked her in the eye and said, *Kill It*, and she turned—

She believed, in that moment, that they could kill It. Maybe not then, and definitely not with that trick again. But It believed them, and It ran away, and they knew it was possible then.

And Eddie lunged across the cavern and pulled Richie down, saying, *I think I got It! I think I killed It!* and Bill’s eyes turned white, and It began laughing, and Bev shouted, *Something’s wrong! Something’s wrong!*

“What did you see, Bill?” she asks.

Ben and Eddie and Richie turn to look at her, but Mike just frowns

and ducks his head closer to the camera.

Right. The Skype audio isn't that good.

She raises her voice. "What did you see?"

A faint delay. Then Bill says, "Audra."

Bev feels the ringing absence that comes after a slap, just all over her whole body. She looks at Ben, who's watching her.

"My wife," Bill says, unaware of the temperature in the room. "Just... Comatose. And me trying to push her up the hill on Silver, like... like Sisyphus, rolling the stone. That's what it wanted me to see."

Oh, Bev thinks, something turning in her heart. *He loves her*. She wasn't sure, but she is now. The deadlights showed her all her boys dying, knowing she loved them, for years and years; and Bill saw his wife, because he loves her.

So how could he do that to her?

And *How could he let me do that to her, too?*

Richie clears his throat and Bev startles a little. "Yes, and then I very handsomely and heroically saved you, good job, me."

"It said that the Turtle died," Bill says. "That it choked on a galaxy."

Mike says, "Huh."

Bev saw them dying and Bill saw his wife beyond his reach. "Richie," she begins.

"No," he says, with a level of certainty he hasn't had since he started drinking.

Mike tries, "Rich, it could be important."

"No," he repeats. Then he drains his shot, and smiles. "And if you keep pushing me, I'm gonna lie to you."

But Bev knows.

Richie goes on. “It suffers you—that’s what the deadlights do, they suffer you, they make you see death and the people you love dying and what you have to do after, and that’s mine, all right? That’s what it did, but what I saw was mine.”

“That’s some bullshit, Richie,” Eddie interrupts.

Bev wants to scrunch her eyes shut and pretend she’s not here. She knows, she knows, she knows.

Richie looks across the room at him. “Is it? Is it some bullshit?” He reaches toward Bev with his empty shot glass and Bev just takes it out of his hand.

“Lay down,” she tells him. “Just lay down.” Just like in the car earlier. Ben takes the glass out of her hand and she guides Richie to put his head down on her lap. Richie glowers but settles with his ear on her thigh, still facing the camera. His glasses creak a little bit.

Bill either ignores or moves past this discomfiting interaction. “But It didn’t lie when it said the Turtle was dead. You remember, you can’t lie in that space, it happened.”

Richie shifts slightly, in a way that makes Bev think that’s not quite the truth. “I remember,” he says.

“Are you sure?”

Bill waits for several seconds, longer than the lag would require, and then says, “Yes. If you were there, you’d know.”

Bev never spoke to anything in the deadlights. She screamed, but nothing and nobody heard her, and she didn’t know who the people were but she recognized something about the red-haired woman being struck. She reminded Bev of her mother, and then the man reminded her of her father.

She didn’t recognize Tom in the singles bar, but he looked at her like he knew her.

“Even—it’s like trying to lie to yourself,” Bill says. “You can try to convince yourself that things work one way, but the pieces are still

there.”

Bev’s stomach jerks as she laughs, silent and without humor. Richie turns his head slightly to look up at her, but she just pushes her fingers through his hair again and he turns back to the camera.

Ben didn’t hear the tape deck. And if there’s no It, no magic but in the seven of them...

Well. Bev knows who screamed that filth at her that night. She could try to convince herself that they weren’t true, but the memories were still there. The things she did still happened.

Eddie drinks and then holds his hand out for the gin bottle. Bev leans to the side, picks it up by the neck, and hands it to him.

Mike is trying to hold them all together. “But you and Richie fought. And then Eddie apparently revealed his past life as an Olympic marksman—” Yeah, even Bev had been impressed by that throw. Eddie’s blushing. “—and It retreated.”

Ben speaks up. “And dropped the eggs.” She almost doesn’t recognize his voice, it’s so low and terrible. The eggs frighten him—of course they do—but they’re the thing that lives in his head. Potential. Something they haven’t closed the book on. He wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand, like he can swipe the words away. “I thought I got them all, I thought... My light was running out. I couldn’t see.”

Sometimes, Bev wakes up from her dreams of walking through fabric—just forests and forests of hanging cloth, like curtains covering archways, and she runs her hands over the velvet and the linen and the gauze without ever pulling them aside, just touching—and she knows that Ben’s awake with her. He sweats in his sleep—everyone does—but he never moves, and he never wakes her.

“It’s okay.” She reaches her free hand out for him, and he lets her wrap her fingers around his. His eyes are—familiar. That’s the way he used to look at her—more than that’s the way he used to look at her, that’s the way he used to look *up* at her, when she was taller than him. “It’s okay,” she tells him, and she sees him listen but she

doesn't know if she can make a difference.

"It is okay. You did the best you could, man." Mike's voice is soft. His gaze shifts elsewhere on the screen; Bev can imagine him peering down into his laptop, into the two windows. It's not right, she thinks, that he's alone again. She's glad he got out, but it's not right that he's alone.

Mike's camera flickers.

No one else seems to notice.

Mike goes on, "And you and Richie chased It down."

Bill says, "Yeah, Richie ripped Its leg off like he was at Red Lobster."

Richie mumbles, "I really hate Red Lobster." Ben looks down at him, perplexed, but it seems unlikely Mike or Bill heard him.

Mike asks, "And then what?"

Bill told them, in short relieved words once Richie came to—once Ben and Mike pried him off Bill's back and laid him out on the street, with the crumbling house behind them, and Richie sat up with his eyes rolling—what he and Richie had done in the Ritual.

"Crushed Its heart," Bill says. He twists his palms against each other, miming grinding something into dust.

And if It was ever scared of them when they were kids, It had to be scared of them as adults, right? When you know something that can hurt you exists, there's always the chance that it comes back.

Maybe It called them home for the same reason that Bev married Tom, three months after he hit her across the face.

"It has to be dead," Bill says.

Ben insists, "But the eggs—Stan said he was defending us from It again, It has to be alive or else why is this happening?"

Mike asks, "Richie, what did you hear about the Turtle?"

Ben looks at Bev, like, *did anyone hear my question or am I just talking to myself?* Bev squeezes his hand—they have time. They have all the time in the world now that they’re out.

“I dreamed it,” Richie said. He sounds drunk. “It said—” His voice drops low. “*You’d better wake up.* I thought it was Darth Vader talking to me, or Mufasa. And then Stan said—Stan said, ‘The Turtle couldn’t help us.’” This he doesn’t say in a voice, just in the careful deliberate words of someone quoting.

Bev remembers that there’s a nonzero chance that Richie might vomit into her lap at any moment and tries to care a little more about that. She glances at the salad bowl, but the only casualties would be her jeans and Ben’s sunny yellow comforter. They crawled through a sewer together.

“Right,” Mike says. “So what I’ve been thinking is—what part of the Ritual of Chüd was the Turtle?”

There is a general pause.

“What?” Ben asks.

“You know—the Turtle *couldn’t* help us. But we were definitely helped. And the Ritual still worked. It—He?—may have told Bill to toss aside the rulebook, but what you described definitely sounds more like a witness than any genuine interference. And if the Turtle’s dead...” Mike raises his eyebrows at the camera and—there’s a blur in the background behind him.

Bev’s shoulders tense and she squeezes Ben’s hand, and he turns to look at her, but she just shakes her head. This isn’t like in the mirror in the Neibolt house—this isn’t Ben being cut into in front of her, nothing’s going to happen to Mike, they got out, they’re *safe*.

Bev never saw any Turtle. Well, there was a turtle in the quarry. Just a common turtle, and they gave it a wide enough berth in case it bit them, because that would just be the last injury they needed, with Mike and Eddie’s wounds and Bev’s shirt covered in blood anyway.

If the Turtle couldn’t help them—and they had help—but there were

seven of them. That was what they were made for. Walking home together, trekking through the tall grass.

“And there’s no way It would help us to defeat It—” Well, maybe not on purpose, but It told them to come home. “—so the magic had to come from somewhere else. So I’ve been thinking, and I think it’s just from us.”

Yes. Just the seven of them, gathered together in glorious purpose. *This kills monsters*, as long as *this is we*, and Bev knew she had to be a part of it, when Bill tried to tell her she couldn’t go into the smokehouse with the rest of them—she knew it was her and not that kid who ripped into her when she beat him at tossing pennies, when she cried and Ben comforted her and Eddie cleaned up the mess, it was the seven of them, and it was so clear when they found Mike that he was one of them too...

“Huh,” Eddie says.

Richie asks slowly and dryly, “Are you saying that the magic was in us the whole time?”

Mike smiles a little, ducking his head like he knows how it sounds. “Well, if the Turtle’s gone. And it’s not from It. What else could it be?”

“Stan,” Richie says, and Mike’s camera fritzes out again, blurring into a field of dark green, but nobody else reacts. Bev takes a deep breath.

It doesn’t affect Mike’s audio. “We’ll get to that. But the magic worked the first time when Stan was standing up with us—Bowers tried to kill him, do you remember that? Bowers tried to kill him and he failed, and then Stan had all those teethmarks in his face from It, from the painting, but he walked out when we saved him.”

When they were all together, when Stan was crying in fear; they chained hands and they walked through the dark out of the sewer, Eddie becoming less insistent like he was fighting and instead moving forward to walk ahead of even Bill, his voice turning matter-of-fact and cold. They walked out. They lived. They thought they had killed it and they didn’t die in the dark. That was magic—some kind of

magic. Bev felt it beating in her chest like the wings of birds, like if they weren't hanging on to each other she could have stepped into the air and out of the water and flown...

"The magic was there before Stan." Mike means before Stan died.

But the magic was there with Stan, and Bev sees a flash of brown eyes in a white face in the camera, just like she saw them in the mirror in the truck. When she opened the lighter it burst into a column of fire, and there's still a scorch mark on the ceiling of the cab.

"He said the thing about my letter," Eddie says.

Bev turns to look at him. He looks grave but not frightened. The scar on his cheek is there, fading from pink into white.

"He said the thing about my letter, that it wasn't really burned, but I hadn't told Richie about that."

Hearing his name, Richie asks, "Your what?"

Eddie shakes his head.

"Yes," Mike says, as though it makes total sense to him. "Yes, and he talked about the blood, not the car, but the blood oath. But what's the other big difference between now and last time, after we fought It? The Turtle is gone, and what else?"

"We remember each other," Bill says, in the calm knowing way he has that makes them all look at him. Then they exchange glances, looking at each other.

It's true. The thing they were most afraid of, when Bill said he had to go back, was that they would never hear from him again—that he would go back to his life (*and his wife*) and the thing that bound them together would fade away, and he would never respond to their calls or recognize their names in his phone, and that while they were sitting through Richie's trial they would just have to sit with the knowledge of what was waiting for them. Bev would walk away with Ben and he would turn into a man she didn't recognize, and Richie would go to jail and never remember why, and who knew what

would happen to Mike or Eddie?

“That’s it,” Mike says. “That’s exactly it—you guys are all together, but Bill and I are out here on our own islands, and we still remember you, it’s not a matter of seeing each other every day and remembering. So the Turtle is gone, and the memory loss is gone, and I think—I *think* that the Turtle took our memories the last time.” There’s an urgency in his voice that Bev wants to respond to but she doesn’t know what to say.

“Why?” Eddie asks. “Isn’t the Turtle supposed to be good?”

Mike says, “Yes, but imagine you had to walk around in the world like this. Going off to college, knowing that something like It was out there.” The presence of one means the possibility of others, and if there’s always another—if Bev knows that now—

She doesn’t know if she believes that the Turtle is good. She’s afraid to ask herself, if she’d remembered Derry, would she have ever ended up with Tom? Would she have dated the guy in college who, apropos of nothing and without warning, broke her nose one night?

She’d like to think the answer is no, but what if it’s not? What if that’s just who she is, and remembering wouldn’t have made a difference anyway?

“You started panicking the moment I called you and reminded you—and let me tell you, holding the memories in my head all these years hasn’t been easy, there are more than a couple people who would say I’m crazy, and no one talks about what they’ve seen. How do you think you could have coped, knowing?”

Bev feels herself take a deep breath and hears it, but it feels echoed all around her. Ben and Richie and Eddie, all breathing in sync with her.

Maybe Mike’s right. Maybe. But she didn’t just lose the memories of It, she lost the memories of all of them, she lost the memories of what it took to get her to stand up to her father, she forgot who she was. For all the years she was a child, supposed to be finding herself, she had no idea who she was, and how could she, without anything but

the pattern on which she was made?

“So if the magic was in us the whole time—” Mike stops abruptly and then smiles a little and rolls his eyes, self-deprecating. “And we woke it up by coming back and remembering, it’s in us now. And what was everyone’s biggest fear when they went back to Derry?”

Richie offers, “That a murderclown was gonna bite my dick off?”

Bev rolls her eyes.

“That we would die there,” Eddie says soberly.

“No,” Ben says. He’s still holding her hand, and he strokes his thumb across the side of her palm. “That we would never walk out.”

He’s right. It wasn’t the fear of dying—Bev lived with a man and knew he was going to kill her one day, and eventually that meant less and less to her as she was less and less there. Sometimes there were gasps as if she was surfacing from deep underwater, in some cave: *this is insane! This is insane! You can’t allow this! You have to go!* But it was always so much harder to move when she was tired, and she was so tired.

She went to Derry thinking, *Well, I might die. I think I even will. But it won’t be at his hands.* And after seeing Stan in the bathtub—it was nice, in that moment, to think she even had a little choice in the matter.

Not like being a girl child, captured in her own home and dragged under the town.

I’m not afraid of you.

You will be.

“Exactly!” Mike says. “Exactly! So when you all left, what happened?”

Eddie answers, and Bev’s glad for it. If Richie spoke he would be flippant, and if Ben spoke he would be sincere and speaking about her, and Bev can’t speak at all.

"It tried to keep us. Because we believed that Derry would try to keep us, and we'd never be able to leave." And then he asks the important question: "Are you saying I did that to myself?"

"Eddie, you're a great driver," Mike says with the utter certainty of anyone who has seen Eddie within ten feet of a car. "But that thing sounds fucking terrifying. You think it would have been the same if I were driving out in my truck?" Blood. "I'll tell you, if I'd been driving, my truck would have caught fire and I'd have burned to death in it, that's what would have happened to me."

Bev said, *I'll show you what burns. I'll show you what burns.* And it was Ben's heart in her hand.

Mike asked, *You know I'd never do that, right?* She spent years dreaming of him splashing gasoline over himself, the red tank in his strong hands. *That was never an option for me.*

We were meant to take that truck and go, she thinks.

"Stan!" Richie says sharply. Bev glances back at Mike's window, but he's alone in the frame. He gestures so wildly that Bev lets go of Ben's hand so she can lean back out of the way. "What about Stan? What about Stan?"

There's a pause and then Bill speaks up. "Stan m-made us cut our palms." The recurrence of the stutter—Bev watches his window, searching for another life in the camera—his wife walking in, even. She can't tell if her conviction that he's not alone is just because they're all gathered together or because Stan is somehow in the electronics, in the cameras that are just recorded mirrors, or because she feels guilty about Audra Denbrough. "Stan made us swear—he initiated the Blood Oath, guys, it was his Blood Oath, and the scars came back when we rem-m-membered." It's quick and he blinks several times, and then he says, "Ben, I think it's time."

It's just as well that Bev let go, because Ben leans across the desk, broad shoulders blocking the screen for a moment, and picks up an envelope from the handful of mail he brought into the room with them. He then leans all the way back in his chair—Bev counts Bill and Mike on the screen, and no one else—and then hands it to

Richie, who half-sits up out of Bev's lap and takes it from him.

It's addressed to *Ben Hanscom*, and it has *The Bohemian Girl* and then a rural route number that must be the lot's address. In the upper left-hand corner is a green sticker: *Mr. & Mrs. Stanley Uris*.

Richie rips open the envelope clumsily, drunkenly. He severs right through the sticker. Bev winces and reaches down to help him, but he sits up sideways, swaying a little, and puts space between them. He scoots up the bed and leans back against the wall, then pulls the letter out of the envelope and holds it up to the light, like he's looking at film negatives.

"You guys better have my salad bowl ready, if you want me to read this," he says. His eyes move slowly over the lot of them, stopping at Eddie.

"Do it," Bill says. *Kill It, Bev.*

Richie clears his throat dramatically and sits up straighter. He takes a deep breath and reads, at first sounding drunk, and then his tone clearing, his consonants correcting and his vowels less drawling. Like they can hear him sobering up in front of them.

"Dear Losers," he says.

"I know what this must seem like, but this is not a suicide note. You're probably wondering why I did what I did. It's because I knew I was too scared to go back. And if we weren't together, if all of us alive weren't united, I knew we'd all die. So I made the only logical move. I took myself off the board. Did it work? Well, if you're reading this, you know the answer."

"I lived my whole life afraid. Afraid of what would come next, afraid of what I might leave behind. Don't. Be who you want to be. Be proud. And if you find someone worth holding onto, never ever let them go. Follow your own path, wherever that takes you."

"Think of this letter as a promise, a promise I'm asking you to make. To me." Richie swallows. "To each other. An Oath. See, the thing about being a Loser is, you don't have anything to lose. So be true. Be brave.

Stand. Believe. And don't ever forget. We're Losers, and we always will be.”

He lowers the letter and his eyes move over the group again—just as slowly, but with a certain sharpness about his eyelids. Not Richie—Richie might be this calculating, but he never lets them see it. He wants to be looked at, not to do the looking. Then he opens his mouth and Stan says, “Well, if you'll forgive the dramatics, I was a little scared for my life at the time, but I meant it.”

Bev throws herself across the bed and into a hug before she knows she's going to do it. “Stan!” she says, and hangs onto him the way she wanted to hang on to him in the mirror that day.

Richie's arm folds over her shoulder, but Stan's voice says, “I'm going to be honest with you, this is much better.” He's smiling; she can hear it. “Trashmouth, you ought to be hammered like this all of the time. Reception's still a little weak—Eddie, come here, just adjust the antennas.”

Eddie stares at Richie but takes half a step closer to the bed. “What does that even mean?”

Richie's voice comes from over Bev's head. “It means,” he says, and then Stan's voice says, “It means there's a lot of darkness around here, and it *shines*, but it shines brighter around you. Come over here.”

Bev slides sideways so that she's sitting next to him, making room for Eddie, and Eddie sits gingerly on the bed like he's afraid Richie's going to bite him. They touch, just Richie's knee to Eddie's leg, and Richie's head shakes back and forth and then tilts onto Bev's shoulder. This is not how Richie sits—Richie sprawls in chairs like the very idea of getting up is impossible, which is probably why he managed to throw his back out one time, but this—Bev remembers Stan crawling under a glass-topped table to get a puzzle piece, and the look of quiet satisfaction on his face when he slotted it in place.

“This is actually pretty nice,” he says. His head lolls back onto Bev's shoulder. “God, it's been so long since I've been drunk.”

Mike says, “*Stan*” like the word is torn out of him, his voice full of tears. Bev tries to look at the monitor but her vision is blurry with how she wants to cry, too, and Ben is nothing more than a familiar shape in the chair, as seen underwater.

“Oh, Mike, it’s not your fault. I’m sorry,” Stan says. Richie’s arm tightens around Beverly’s shoulders. “It was a stupid thing to do, and I shouldn’t have done it, but it was never your fault. You only told the truth.”

There’s a muffled sound that Bev realizes belatedly is Mike sniffling. She closes her eyes and they overflow, tears rolling down her face. To see him is one thing, but to hear him—better than sign language, better than Charades in the mirror, better than the both of them crying on each other. Anyone would rather hear reassurances than grieve, but Stan cried not like he was grieving for himself, but like a frightened child who has made a mistake, who has walked into a haunted house against his better judgement and now wishes he could leave. *You left me*, he said. Bev wished that weren’t the truth, but she didn’t even recognize him. What could she have done? Said, *Mike, call Stan’s wife now, send her upstairs, interrupt him?* Said, *Mike, Stan’s killing himself, he’s bleeding, and if there’s still time you have to tell her to kick down the door?*

“Stan,” says Bill’s voice, crackly and distorted over the call, but there’s no other word it could be.

Richie’s chest expands as he takes in a deep breath. “I thought about you. In the moment,” Stan says. Bev remembers him saying Bill’s name, doesn’t she? What he was doing was clear; the words, not so much, they started to fade as soon as she woke up, as soon as she understood that she was upset by this dream, but she wasn’t allowed to remember any of them, wasn’t allowed to hear him say *Bill*. “You kept me from going totally insane, I think, just long enough for me to fall asleep.” Richie’s hand tightens on Bev’s shoulder and he takes another deep breath. “It—I didn’t hurt, Bill.”

Well, there’s that, at least. He just fell asleep. He dripped blood onto Bev’s face and it was horrible and she wanted to scream when the metal bit into him, but it didn’t hurt him.

It only killed him, but it didn't hurt.

Stan gives a sigh. “Having a body again is weird, though.” His tone is contemplative, tired. “I was so scared of everything else, and I thought I knew the way the world worked, but when I threw that away I kind of threw out cause and effect and control in a lot of the ways I wanted. I don’t think I’m going to stick around forever, it’s pretty uncomfortable.”

Bev feels her lips form the word *honey* but she doesn’t speak it. She just got him back. It’s more than they should be allowed to have, but already she wants to hold on.

“Are you—” Eddie’s voice breaks and he tries again. “Are you haunting us?”

“Haunting you?” Stan repeats. She can hear Richie’s hair shift against his collar as he turns his head; it’s easier, she thinks, not looking, just pretending she’s leaning against Stan, that Richie’s gone quiet, that they’re all in the room together, maybe the clubhouse, and that everything worked out fine. “No, I’m not—*oh*, you mean when Trashmouth kept fucking around with the radio.”

Eddie’s tone becomes very flat. “Yes,” he says. “The ten-hour playlist, Stan.”

Bev hears him smile. “He wanted to talk,” he says, in the same light voice he used to say *Nice throw*. Then she hears Richie. “Oho, Stan the Man gets—” Stan interrupts him. “*No, no, no*, we can’t keep doing this.”

It’s better if she doesn’t look. She can feel the vibration of the voice under her ear.

Stan’s tone is a little smug when he says, “Anyway, I came back with the power to shut up Trashmouth, so the winner takes it all, Tozier. And if he was going to keep torturing himself with the radio—” Bev jumps and the hand around her shoulder tightens, holding her close in place. “—I had to stop him somehow.” His tone softens. “I am sorry about the tape deck, Bev, I tried to stop it and I couldn’t get in, you don’t pick up as well.”

Oh god. Ben didn't hear it, but Stan heard it, Stan knows.

It's okay, some part of her whispers, even as she covers her mouth. You saw him bleeding out. You know the worst thing he ever did, and it's okay if he knows about you. And she has the same quiet conviction that he won't tell. There are more important things to talk about.

"I saw you," she says, and it comes out half a sob. "I saw you in the mirror."

Stan takes in another breath and holds himself stiff. "Yeah, I think that did more harm than good."

Bev feels another tear slip out of her closed eyes and she reaches up and wipes it away.

"Listen. I don't know how often I'll get to do this, let alone do it without killing Richie in the process."

Richie's heart is steady where Bev can hear it, and his breathing is steady—assuming he gets the breath Stan takes in, which, why wouldn't he? But when he got sick in the Townhouse and fainted that was bad, and when he was hunched over the counter earlier he sounded like he was trying to vomit up Stanley, an entire man. She gets her boys back—she gets to say goodbye—but only for a moment. She gets to remember him the last time she hears from him, but not for nearly as long as Stan deserves.

She wishes they could all stay. Tuck into this room. *Sleepover. High school rules.* She never went to high school with any of them, but it would be nice to be close again.

"I meant it," Stan says. "Everything I said. You have to be true, and you have to be honest, and you can't lie, because if you can't believe in each other, the magic will go away. You have to be honest, because you have to keep your magic. You know that things like It are out there, and once you believe in them, they—"

They come back. They always come back. There's always another It out there, or something worse.

Richie's head shakes slowly and Stan says, affectionately, "God,

Richie, you're so fucking stupid." Bev smiles because it's familiar.

Eddie gives a short nervous laugh. "Because we believe in It. We'll be able to see the bad things, now."

"Yes," Stan says. "Thank you. Tell the truth. It's going to hurt. But you have to do it." He shifts a little, putting space between their shoulders, and Bev looks up at him. It's Richie's face, the smile he had on when he hugged her in the parking lot. Then he looks over her head toward Ben, and then toward the screen.

Ben asks, "Stan. Stan, is It dead? Did we kill It?"

"Yes."

Bev turns her head in time to see Ben slump in his chair. He says, "But Derry—"

"Derry collapsed when you knew you weren't coming back. You pulled the columns down," Stan says. "I can't tell you that you got all the eggs, Ben, but if there are any left, they're in the bottom of the ocean, and it's going to take a long time for them to dig their way out, and Derry won't be there when it does."

Bev never really understood what it meant, when Mike and Richie said they saw where It came down in the jungle, and the creatures that went scuttling out of its way. But she recognizes the look on Ben's face, the slight lowering of his chin. Suddenly he's thirteen years old again, instead of the man in the kitchen smiling into her mouth, and Bev wants to draw her to him and hold him.

"You did good," Stan says kindly. "We stopped It for twenty-seven years. You bought us a lot more time than that. Maybe all of time."

Maybe all of time, and maybe eventually another seven people will stand up and fight and win, with the same conviction they all felt and the love for each other they still feel. If it can happen once, it can happen again. Seven people gathered together, united by death and by fighting for each other and by creating a family so that no one has to walk home alone, no one has to go hunted through the place where they live, by monsters or by people. Just as there's always

another It—well, there are losers the world over.

“I don’t have that kind of time,” Stan says. “I love you.”

Bev answers back, “We love you too,” and knows that it’s true.

Eddie agrees, “I love you, Stan.”

“I love you too,” Stan repeats. “Be true.”

Richie’s hand reaches out for Ben and Bev sees Ben’s face as he clasps it, the utter seriousness in his expression. *Devotion*, she realizes. That’s what that look of Ben’s is, it’s devotion, and the only reason she didn’t recognize it until now was because it appeared on Ben’s face almost the moment she met him. She remembers lowering the yearbook, the white pages revealing his soft flushed face. Bev’s heart tightens.

“I love you,” Stan says again. “Even you, Richie.”

And then Richie keels over.

Bev, still with his arm wrapped around her shoulder, puts a hand on his side and tries to lean back, but he’s a lot bigger than her. He falls partially into her and partially into the wall, and his head tips back but his eyes are open, and after a moment he lifts his head. Bev looks for the salad bowl but it’s on Richie’s other side, behind Eddie.

There’s a long moment where even Mike and Bill are silent on the cameras.

Then Richie takes off his glasses and starts massaging at his skull. “My fucking head, Stan, you asshole. Bev, darling, I’m cut off.”

Everyone lets out a long sigh, and Bev reaches up to wipe at the tears that slip out with it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, I’m pretty happy with this one. This is where the paths start to split--if you read Eddie Lives, you know that Richie and Eddie leave tomorrow, and

now Ben and Bev have to start the work of rebuilding. I have a surprising number of social engagements for the next two days, maybe three, but I already have the scenes in mind, so I expect to update before this weekend's over. Thank you so much for reading!

10. Out of Excuses

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben takes a step towards communication. Bev takes a step toward the multiverse.

Notes for the Chapter:

Again, I did not think that this chapter was going to get out in anything close to a timely manner. I had a very fancy dinner tonight and my fiance is currently asleep on the living room floor behind me at *checks watch* 3 in the morning. No idea what the weekend will bring.

Content warnings: Ben has a little bit of a flashback, grief, involuntary nudity, mentions of intimate partner violence (Tom), smoking and addiction to cigarettes, jokes about opiates and drowning oneself in the shower. Fairly tame as far as this fic goes.

So that's how Richie gets the guest bed.

"So... that's a lot," Mike says in Stanley's wake.

Ben feels stunned. Like, he ought to be happy with the knowledge that the eggs are gone. In the end it doesn't matter whether he did a good job or a terrible one smashing through the field of eggs, because a real world-ending flood has come along and is wiping them all out to sea. But there are places at the bottom of the Atlantic, surely, where it is dark and cold. There are caverns.

Every time he remembers stamping through the eggs they get bigger in his mind, until suddenly he's in the *Alien* franchise and they're up to his waist and glowing green, up to his shoulder and dully orange with purple veins in them like light through an eyelid, so large that kicking at the membrane only causes things to lurch out of them in the dark and—

“Ben?” Bev asks.

Ben blinks and looks at her. The green light from the camera and the bright yellow duvet seem to poke him in the eye.

“I want him to be right,” Ben says. It’s the truth. “I want that to be Stan.”

“It is Stan,” Eddie says. He flushes when Bev and Ben look at him and looks to the camera, like he didn’t expect them to take him so seriously. “Richie can’t fake that. Look, if Stan sent everyone a letter —my wife said she burned mine, and I never told Richie about that.”

“It’s the same letter,” Bill says. “Ben’s letter is the same as mine, here —” He vanishes off camera, there’s a sound of someone pulling open drawers, and then he reappears, brandishing an envelope. “I’m almost sure—yeah, it’s word for word the same.”

“And Richie never heard Stan speak, but Mike did,” Eddie says.

Ben puts up his hands. “I’m not saying Richie’s faking anything.”

“Your mom,” Richie mumbles.

“I’m saying—It impersonated us before. Hell, It impersonated Stan before.” Ben... still feels a little guilty about that, in the way that he thinks an adult man ought to feel guilty about ruthlessly stabbing a child’s head. “Not just Stan—It impersonated you, It impersonated Bev, and It was pretty damn convincing—it knew all the members of New Kids on the Block.”

“Why the fuck would It know all the members of New Kids on the Block?” Eddie asks.

“Because It knew the things that scared us,” Bev replies. Ben gives her a sidelong look and she shakes her head. “No, I mean—It was in our heads. It knew what frightened us. It’s...” She gestures to either side of her head, as though to say *Still in there*.

“Would It bother making us feel better about Stan?” Bill asks. “Or would It appear as him and rant and scream at us for leaving him behind, and for driving him to suicide?”

Bev flinches. Mike grimaces.

Ben blinks once and says, “It might, if It wanted us to walk away thinking the job was done.”

Bill tilts his head once and nods.

“We’re out of Derry now,” Mike says. “I’ve been thinking.”

Ben gestures for Mike to continue.

“The lot of you are super successful.”

Eddie makes a disbelieving noise.

“Edward Kaspbrak, I have seen your car,” Mike says.

Richie giggles. Eddie waves with one hand, like *Fine, you got me there.*

“And when we fought It for the first time—It said it would give us long happy lives, as long as we gave It Bill.”

Bill’s eyes widen a little and he glances from side to side.

“I just think it’ll be interesting to see whether you guys continue to enjoy the same level of success from here on out,” Mike says.

Ben grimaces. He’s doing all right for himself, enough that he can basically write Mike a blank check for his truck and have no worries about helping Beverly get on her feet again, but he did just miss a very large contract, and Joey definitely thinks he’s having a midlife crisis. Which is true, just not in the way you would expect from your employer. The point of having a firm for doing contracting is so that he doesn’t have to hover over every step in the process, to give him a bit more freedom to do the things he’d like to do, but nothing gets produced with his firm’s name without him giving it the stamp of approval—and he definitely left the Hong Kong proposal on the table for an unprofessional length of time.

He’s not sure. As soon as he learned that building things was something he could do and get paid for, instead of just something that would bring the police into the Barrens to tell them off for

flooding downtown Derry, there was never really any other option for him. He'd like to think his success is up to him, in the way that his failures have all been up to him.

Wasn't he just wondering why Moriyama and Teshima wanted to work with him of all people? He'd needed that contract, not financially but emotionally. He needed to leave Nebraska and go up to Canada and suck in the air that felt so cold and thick it was like drinking from a river, and to forget about his big empty house.

Why would It throw him a bone when he was grieving his mother?

"Or," Mike says, his tone lighter, "maybe I'll suddenly enjoy unprecedented success as a librarian."

"You are indeed the king of small-town librarians, Mikey," Bill offers.

"Stan said we'll see other things now," Bev says quietly.

Richie draws his knees up to his chest and cradles his head in his hands. "We should quit our day jobs and become monster hunters," he says, too muffled for Mike and Bill to hear him over the cameras.

Instead of asking him to speak up, Bev asks, "Richie, are you okay?"

Richie shakes his head.

Okay, Richie's too drunk. Eddie's already standing up, looking grim but determined.

"I'm gonna switch you guys to my phone," Ben says, leaning over the desk to pick it up and do just that. "Why don't we give Rich some space?"

"I'm," Richie begins, and then just about falls over onto Eddie. "Yeah, I'm not good."

"Okay," Bev says, standing up from the bed too.

Eddie gets Richie by one shoulder and rolls him onto his side. "Better?"

“Possession feels like... flu?” Richie offers.

“Mm-hmm.” Eddie pulls Richie’s glasses off and folds them on the nightstand. Bev throws the duvet over him.

Ben transfers the Skype call to his phone. They turn the light out and leave Richie to rest, because none of them have any idea what the physical symptoms of ghost possession are or how to make them better. They take the call out into the living room and for a moment Ben fusses with the idea of trying to transfer them both to his TV.

“It’s fine,” Bill says. “I have to go soon anyway.”

“Yeah?” Ben asks.

“What time is it there?” Mike asks.

“After two,” Bill answers.

Ben frowns a little, not just because they’re too old now to be staying up this late but because Bill doesn’t live by himself. He almost wants to ask if everything’s okay with his wife, but if the answer’s *No* he doesn’t want to drag that out.

“You okay, man?” he asks generally.

The resolution is even worse on the smaller screen, but Ben can make out Bill’s smile. “Not really,” Bill answers. “You?”

Ben’s mouth opens to say *I’m fine* but he surprises himself by admitting, “I’ve been better.” When he glances up, Bev is looking at him and he quickly says, “I mean—not you, but—”

“I know,” she says, her eyes kind. Ben remembers her and her friend Kay talking about the civil suit they’ll have to bring on top of criminal charges, trying to get her company out from under her husband. If they can’t count on—Ben doesn’t want to say *divine*, but *cosmic* intervention anymore, what kind of a time is she going to have with it?

The same as anyone else, is the answer.

It offered them *long happy lives* at the cost of Bill, but they didn't give him Bill. And Ben is... suspicious of any characterization of their lives as *happy*. Successful, maybe, by the metric of success where they have money and names for themselves, mostly, but Ben has been lonely for so long he forgot that he even felt it, and Bev certainly wasn't happy. And maybe they haven't all talked about it, they haven't all aired everything wrong with their lives *aloud* exactly, but Ben wouldn't try to build anything on the foundations they are now. Or—were, when they arrived in Derry. They had to peel down to childhood to find something solid, solid joy amidst the terror.

"What other things does Stanley think we'll see?" Eddie asks.

Ben doesn't have an answer for that.

Neither, apparently, does Mike. "I suspect we'd have to ask Stanley that," he says.

"Cosmic shit like this," Bill says, his voice low and crackly, but he doesn't finish it.

"Bill," Bev says. "You said It couldn't lie, in the Ritual."

Bill nods.

"How is it that we're remembering things that did and didn't happen?" She pauses, visibly steels herself, and then presses, "Or that couldn't have happened, or that can't happen now?"

There's no one that question can be directed to except Mike, unless it's just a question for the universe in general.

"I don't know," Mike replies. His voice is tired in the way it was when they arrived at the Jade of the Orient—long hours spent contemplating, investigating, trying to learn and arm himself. "I thought I understood It, toward the end. When Bowers came after me—he was just one more loose end, you know? One more thing It was trying to wrap up, and if we all killed each other, so be it."

Bowers had never needed Its coaxing. Derry did something to people—made the apathetic turn their blind eyes, made the cruel vicious. Ben is aware of the scar inside his hip in a way he usually isn't, when

he's just sitting around wearing his own skin. *Welcome home.*

"I don't understand this," Mike admits. "Or—I don't yet. I did research, I did interviews, I talked to my dad. But there's no one to talk to about this except us, as far as I can tell."

And Stan asked them to tell the truth.

They talk a little longer after that, but Bill's index cards are now completely indecipherable and Mike seems to have more questions than answers. Eventually Bill apologizes and says he has to go.

"Get some rest, man," Mike advises, and Ben nods.

"I love you guys," Bill says. "Keep each other safe. Mikey—be careful."

"Yeah, that'd be my luck, wouldn't it?" Mike asks. "I finally escape *Derry* of all places, and then a rocket ship falls on me at the Space Center."

"Yeah, you don't get that in Derry," Bev agrees.

There isn't much to say after that, so they all give up and go to bed. Ben takes spare bedding out of the linen closet for Eddie on the couch, but he insists he can make the bed himself, and anyway he was going to go in and check on Richie and make sure he isn't choking on his own vomit. Ben feels a hovering need to actively host again, but Bev wraps her fingers around his wrist and gives him a concerned look. It's late.

After all that, Beverly climbing up into his bed—he has to get a shorter bedframe—is almost anticlimactic. Her hair glows in the light from the bedside lamp; she's wearing the pajamas she wore to the hospital, with the blue flowers on them that remind him of the china they shattered in the Townhouse kitchen.

"Tell me," she says.

Ben pauses and looks at her face, perplexed. "Tell you what?"

She smiles. "Whatever it is you're afraid to tell me right now."

He considers, peels his jeans off, and flops down on the bed on his stomach. He props himself up on his elbows and looks at her, sitting up against the pillows. Her legs are faintly prickly, and he runs a finger down and then back up her skin.

“I love you,” he says, and then shakes his head. “I’m not afraid to tell you that.”

“I noticed,” she says.

He blushes a little at that, but then averts his gaze and continues staring at her skin. There’s a faint reflectiveness to it, where she shaved her legs. She’s soft. He glances up at her to make sure this idle touch is okay, but she’s just watching him.

“I’m afraid,” he admits. “Not of you. Maybe for you, a little. The way I am for the rest of us.”

He wants this to be the end of it—wants them to have succeeded, to have put an end to that incomprehensible evil, to have repaired the broken rules of the world. But he can’t trust that’s the end of it.

Bev hums. “Me too,” she says.

He doesn’t want her to be afraid. There’s an ache in his gut, that he can’t help her.

“What if I held you?” Bev asks.

His face heats. “Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

Ben turns out the light and slides his legs under the covers, rolling over to lie next to her. He puts his head not on her breast, but just under it. He can feel her floating ribs and where her body softens suddenly. Her hands fold into his hair.

“Can you breathe like this?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“You dream,” she says. Her fingers slide through his hair, over his scalp, trying to soothe him even as she says it.

He sighs; he doesn’t want to think of it, here in her arms. “I do.”

“You wake up sweating and freaked out.”

“Do I talk?”

“No.”

That’s not a surprise; he doesn’t say anything in the dream, trying to conserve every breath and keep slogging through the nest.

Isn’t that what you’ve made here? a nasty little voice in his ear asks. A little nest, where a mother was killed and her child persisted? A place you wanted to take all your little Loser friends back to?

He sighs. “I dream I’m back in the cavern, stomping eggs, and my light’s going out. And then I wake up in the dark, and...” He doesn’t want to tell her how it feels to wake up. It’s better when she’s there within touching distance, in a bed. On the road, he sometimes woke in the dark alone with other cars’ headlights shining in his eyes, and that was mostly fine, when Bev was being a champion night driver. That and the air conditioning or the heating blowing on his arms made him feel less suffocated.

“You can wake me up,” Bev says. “I want you to wake me up.”

He doesn’t address this at first, instead choosing to sketch a little higher over her knee. “Have you dreamed?”

“Not like I normally do—I mean, not like I used to,” she replies. “Sometimes. People wake up in the night, sometimes.”

Ben’s not accustomed to sharing a bed with another person. “That was the way sleep cycles worked before electricity,” he murmurs. “You’d take a first sleep, and then wake up in the night and eat or read or have sex or go out and talk to the neighbors, and then you’d go back inside and take your second sleep.”

“I love your health trivia,” she says.

“That bodes well, because I have a lot of it,” he says. He leans forward and puts his chin down on her stomach, then runs his beard over the fabric of her shirt to hear the rustle.

She laughs a little. “Wake me up this time, if you dream.” She reaches down and runs her hand over his cheek. “How would you feel if I was having nightmares, and I didn’t wake you up?”

Maybe Ben would feel better with moving air in the room, so he knows he’s not below ground in a still cavern.

“Okay,” he says. “We’ll wake each other up.”

“And you’ll tell me more health facts.”

“Corn flakes were invented to reduce libido.”

She giggles.

“The keto diet was invented to control seizures in epileptic children.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Do you want to get flu shots together?”

She laughs again and he feels it deep in her belly. “I don’t know, that’s a big commitment.”

“Let’s protect each other.” He feels for her hand and clasps it in both of his.

“Okay,” Bev says. “We’ll get a dog in the distant future, and we’ll get flu shots in the near future.”

He takes her palm and presses his mouth to it.

Bev dreams.

Not a bad dream, not a beautiful one. More of walking down what

looks like a fabric store aisle, the racks of cloth in front of her. She reaches up and pulls at one, and this thick tweed rolls out and into her palm, black and white and rough. Beneath it is a red knit, thick enough she can grab a fistful and feel how soft it is. Behind her there's a roll of cotton sateen that, when she pulls it loose to look at it, is dark and full of a spray of moons and stars, little planets, asteroids. The closer she looks the more detail she sees—flecks of white and blue and gold.

"Careful with that," a voice says.

She looks up and a tall bearded man rolls the sateen back up. It slips out of her fingers.

"It's a choking hazard," he says. "Trust me."

Bev doesn't recognize him, but he seems familiar. He stands an arm's length away from her, but after a moment he reaches out and sets a palm on her abdomen. His thumb covers her navel. In that moment she realizes she is naked. She ought to feel violated, ought to take a step back—but she feels nothing at all, just the same comfort and fascination she felt poring over the fabrics. She looks down at the hand.

"Am I pregnant?" she asks, her brain hazy with dream logic.

"Not in this life," the man says. "Go on. He's waiting for you."

Bev turns to look down the aisle and sees a figure vanish just out of sight.

"Thank you," she tells the man with the beard, and hurries down the aisle. She's not wearing shoes. The linoleum is cold on her feet. She dodges past a display of floral prints and peers around. "Ben?"

There's the heel of a shoe vanishing into the next aisle.

Bev puts her hand down on a roll of silk, so palely blue that it seems white and patterned with clusters of red flowers, large roses and small poppies. "Ben?" she repeats, as she steers herself into the next aisle.

There are birds roosting on all of the displays here. Their wings and bodies are black, but their heads and shoulders are iridescent blue. The person standing there, raising his hand to reach out to them, is not Ben, but Stan. And he's not the adult she saw with the reading glasses and the dark green cardigan, but the boy in the blue polo shirt. He's wearing a kippah and a cream-colored shawl with blue tassels. He turns to look at her.

"Oh, sorry," he says, his voice high and familiar once more. "I didn't think this would happen."

Bev squints at him, trying to comprehend. She glances up at the birds, remembers her nakedness, and reaches out to unroll a silk crepe flowered in black and red and blue. This she wraps around her body; as soon as she's covered the fabric slides away from the rest of the roll without the need for scissors. She holds it over the burn scar on her breast—but there is no burn scar on her breast, because she's a child again, she hardly has any breasts to speak of, and there's no hair hanging around her neck and shoulders but instead curling up around her ears.

"We just talked," she says.

"We did," Stan agrees.

"This is a dream."

"Yes."

Bev thinks about that for a moment. "Was it really you?"

"One of me," Stan replies.

She stares at him. "Are you really Stan?"

He smiles, laughs a little. "Yes, I'm Stan. You're Beverly."

"I'm Beverly."

"You don't like Bevvy."

"I don't," she agrees.

“Is this a good dream?” he asks her.

She looks at the rolls of fabric, and then up at the birds again. “What kind of birds are those?”

“Common grackles,” he replies.

She nods. “It’s an okay dream.”

“Should I go?”

“No,” she says. “No, it’s not fair, I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” he says. He rubs at his eye with the back of his hand; he seems tired.

“We all still love each other,” Bev tells him. “Do you know how rare that must be?”

“I do.”

“And we love you too.”

Stan is still a little boy—well, he became a man when she knew him, but he was a boy the first time they went into Neibolt—but his eyes look old and familiar. More alive than the last time she saw them—no resigned frightened cast to the eyelids, just the tired feeling of a boy who’s been out playing in the sun, who might like to lie down in the grass and get some rest.

“Yes. I love you too.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No, Bev. It doesn’t hurt.” He blinks once. “It should hurt, but it doesn’t.”

“I was afraid he was going to kill me,” she confesses. “And that it would hurt the whole time. That he would hurt me so badly I would die. He’d just go too far.”

“Not in this life,” Stan says.

His words are comforting in the way that the fabric wrapped around her body is comforting. Like a blanket.

“What do we need to look out for?” she asks him.

“Oh, lots of things. Bees and werewolves and chattery teeth.” He tips his head a little bit. “Summer people. A knife missing from the Applebee’s. Mike’s going to have something coming, soon.”

“Something bad?”

“No, he’ll like it.” He shrugs. “It’s Mike.”

“We thought it might be over. We hoped it would be over.”

“I know.” Stan shrugs again. “So did I. I was...” He closes his eyes and his shoulders hitch a little bit. One of the grackles flies down to rest on the sleeve of his shirt, and its talons sink into the cloth and go straight through.

“Does that hurt?” Bev asks.

“Nothing hurts,” Stan replies. “It should hurt, but it doesn’t.” He smiles. “I was so afraid it was going to hurt, and then it didn’t, and I wish it had.”

Tom used to belt her across the back until she pissed raspberry juice and took her meals standing up.

“I don’t want you to hurt,” she tells him, and he’s a little boy and she’s a grown woman again. She ought to be able to keep him safe. “I would protect you, if you’d let me.”

“I know, Bev.”

She looks around at the looming birds. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“That’s okay,” Stan says. “I know you don’t. It’s not your fault.”

“I know it’s not my fault, but all the same.”

“None of it was ever your fault,” he tells her.

She doesn't know what to say to that. Her hair brushes her bare shoulders.

"The turtle couldn't help us," Stan says. "Interference. But It never had that problem—you know how It interfered. You *know* how It interfered. And it wasn't fair. It wasn't. But nothing ever is. And I—" He grabs the tassels on his shawl in his left hand and shakes slightly, like he needs something to hold onto. The bird with its talons in his shoulder tilts its head so that it can stare at Bev out of one white eye.

"I love you," she tells him again.

He stills. His shoulders relax. "I know," he says. "Listen, Bev." She listens. "It sent Bowers because It could only hurt us while we were afraid. Bowers could hurt us whenever. But you—you can hurt him back, now. And maybe he'll try something. But you can kill him dead, and you don't ever have to raise a hand to do it. I know you. You're Beverly fucking Marsh."

Smoke streams from her mouth, startling her.

"Bowers is dead," Bev says.

"Not Bowers, your—"

Richie yells, "*Motherfucker!*"

The fabric store dissolves around her and she's wide awake and rigid in the dark of Ben's bedroom. Ben startles awake in the same moment; she hears him groan and feels his forehead press into her stomach.

"Are you okay?" he asks Bev.

"Fine," she replies.

"Okay," Ben says. He sits up, raises his voice slightly, and calls, "Are you okay or are you getting murdered?"

There's a slightly abashed pause. Then Eddie calls back, "We're fine, Ben!"

“Okay,” Ben says, too tired to shout through the wall. He lowers his head back to her stomach. The weight is heavy and pleasant; she can see why she dreamed of someone touching her belly. “What time is it?”

She looks over at the blue clock. “Just after one.”

“Fuck,” Ben says. “I love our friends.”

“But you hate them a little bit too?”

“Just sometimes.” He wraps his arms around her waist and she scoots her hips down slightly so her head’s further away from the headboard. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she says. “I dreamed I was in a fabric store.”

“Very nice,” he says.

“It was full of birds. Grackles.”

“I’m not dreaming,” Ben replies, and seems to fall back to sleep.

Bev closes her eyes and drifts, but the fabric store does not return. She wakes up when the sun is coming in through the windows and she tries to roll over but there’s a heavy weight on her hip, and as soon as she moves against it it lifts off of her. That’s more distracting than it tumbling off her would have been, so she opens her eyes.

Ben is laying there, his head at about level with her thighs, staring up at her. As soon as she catches him watching he says, “Sorry. Not trying to be creepy.”

She laughs a little. “Am I snoring?”

“A little bit,” he says. “It’s cute.”

She closes her eyes again and rolls to the side. “I think you’re biased,” she mumbles.

“Nah.” He kisses her just above the waistband of her shorts. A faint spark of heat goes through her. “Purely objective.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He smiles into her midriff. “So you know how we talked about spending a week in bed?”

Right now sleep and sex feel about equally appealing. She could go either way. “Mm-hmm,” she says, ready to be convinced.

“I don’t have any food for you afterwards, and I feel like making you breakfast in the morning is one of the necessary steps.”

She grins without looking up. “I’m spoiled.”

“Good.” Another kiss, dry and affectionate instead of teasing. “I like you spoiled.”

She laughs into the pillow.

His hands wrap around the backs of her knees and squeeze. “I’m gonna go for a run and then go grocery shopping,” he says. “Is there anything you want?”

Bev’s mouth tastes like a hangover, but she doesn’t feel it. “English muffin,” she replies.

“Is that all?”

She nods. “And bacon.”

“I can do that.” He releases her legs. “Do you like marmalade?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Not with bacon, though.”

She wakes up enough to watch him dress—he blushes a little bit when he notices her, but he doesn’t turn his back to her, just strips out of his boxers and lets her watch, lets her look at him soft between his legs with the scar on his hip. She feels lazily possessive, something lionlike; she could reach out for him and he’d come to her, she’s sure of it, but the knowing is enough. He pulls a T-shirt over his head and then steps into a pair of athletic shorts.

“I’m gonna brush my teeth,” he says. “Shower after I run.”

“Okay,” she says, and closes her eyes again.

“Kiss,” he warns her, and she opens her eyes and leans up to return his kiss. They both have morning breath; she smiles when she lays back down.

She doesn’t notice him go into the bathroom, or come back out, or leave the room. When she wakes up again she reaches to check her phone, remembers that her iPhone was destroyed when she (*don’t think about it*) was in Derry, and feels around for her flip phone to check the time. It’s early, but she’s definitely awake. She sets her phone down and flops down onto her back.

Ben has a nice bed. She should have expected this, but it’s really nice. She can’t tell if it’s memory foam or what, but it’s a king-sized bed and she’s been sleeping on a queen since she graduated college. And still they slept wrapped up in each other in the center. She idly pats the bedding, the cool gray comforter and the white sheets, and tucks her face into the pillowcase to see if she can smell his hair, but everything smells like detergent and the faint sweetness after ironing.

Does Ben iron his bedsheets? Does he have someone who irons his bedsheets for him? Wow.

She gets up and walks into his bathroom, which is also white accented with charcoal gray, but with traces of flame orange. There’s a print of a pagoda at night, its lights shining like a beacon. She gets within an inch of the print so she can make out the texture of the canvas beneath it, and then she reprimands herself for getting distracted and brushes her teeth.

He has a very nice walk-in shower. There’s a wooden bench in it and everything, like a sauna. Bev wonders if he was a little more influenced by his trip to Japan than he’s necessarily aware of. She washes quickly—she has to tell him to buy unscented soap—and uses his shampoo.

She lost most of her toiletries when she threw them at Tom. Since then she hasn’t been moisturizing with any regularity, has been using hotel shampoo and conditioner, has let her hands go dry and cracked. Her hair is brittle and frizzing at the ends.

Should cut it off, she thinks to herself, as she pushes a hand through it, and she remembers the dream of being a child.

What did Stan tell her she needed to look out for?

Chattery teeth. That one she remembers clearly. And something is coming to Mike—but not something frightening, something he'll like.

She goes back into Ben's room and unfolds her suitcase, but then has no idea what to do with her clothes. That's a problem for a later time—she'll worry about whether she has to hang things up or whether Ben has to make room in his drawers or whether she'll need her own dresser or something once she actually has Ben here to ask. She dresses in jeans and one of her blouses (without any bloodstains on it, shit, she forgot to soak that overnight), and then texts Mike.

Dreamed of Stan last night. He says something is coming to you, but that you'll like it.

Mike replies: *Is it acceptance to NASA*

Bev texts back: *Did you apply to NASA?*

Mike: *Nah. But I've got the whole rest of my life now, don't I?*

That's it exactly. *Welcome, Beverly Marsh, to the first morning of the rest of your life. Welcome home, he's holding all the doors open to you.*

She has no idea what to do.

With Tom there was routine—there was work, and he would get his breakfast when he made his way into the office, and he would buy lunch for himself, and Bev would have dinner waiting for him when he got home or she would get the belt across her breasts; or she would stay late at the office and have to remember to call him or *whap!* with the belt, or maybe *and whap!* with the belt, if he didn't like her tone on the phone. Noodles Romanoff that tasted like her mother made it. Beer with dinner, beer with TV.

Ben not only has no expectations for her, he wants her expectations for him. But Bev is so frazzled at the moment—*this is all too good to be true*, her stomach tells her, *better keep looking around the corner to see*

who's in the room with you, better check the emotional weather, better keep yourself safe, Bevvy, I worry.

Bev thinks very clearly *Fuck you* and walks out to make coffee.

To her surprise, Ben comes in with Eddie. Both are sweating but look clammy in the early-morning chill. Ben leans down to kiss her cheek as though it's instinctive.

"There's coffee in the pot," she tells them, though there's still no creamer.

"I was going to go to the grocery store after this. Eddie and I got to talking," Ben says apologetically.

Bev smiles a little bit; the idea of Ben chatting enough to get carried away and lose track of time is still funny. "Yeah? Did anyone check on Richie to make sure he didn't choke on his vomit and die in the night?"

Eddie is definitely flushed. "He didn't get sick. I mean, not that I heard, anyway."

"Well that's refreshing," Bev says. She stirs her coffee more for something to do than anything else.

Eddie goes into his toiletry bag, pours a glass of water, and then goes to check on Richie.

Bev waits until she can't hear his footsteps anymore and then murmurs to Ben, "Did he sleep on the couch?" The pillows are still stacked on top of each other, minus any dents where a head might have rested.

Ben lifts his brows, widens his eyes a little, and then shakes his head.

She feels her eyes widen in turn. "Oh damn," she says.

"Yeah, he's rattled," Ben says. "Don't say anything." He slaps a notepad down on the countertop and murmurs, "English muffins, bacon." He starts making a grocery list.

"I see everything. I say nothing." Bev sips her coffee.

Eddie comes back out says, "Still alive. I should take a shower. Uh, Ben, I used your towels yesterday to remove the evil tape deck?"

Bev chuckles despite herself at *evil tape deck*, because she has to laugh at it or be afraid. It's a stupid fear, it's a little girl fear, and for all she knows she'll never see a tape deck ever again.

"Yeah, there's more." Ben sets his pen down. "I need to shower too, I'll get them." He goes into the master bedroom again and comes back out with a stack of brown towels. Eddie takes one, picks up his entire toiletry bag, and vanishes into the guest bathroom. Ben comes back to the grocery list and picks up his pen again.

"Unscented soap," Bev tells him.

Ben raises his eyebrows as though confused and then realizes that she's giving him things for the list. "Any brand?"

"Dove," she replies. "Nivea hand cream." She gives him a list of her skincare products, tells him the shampoo and conditioner she uses, and adds casually, "And we need more condoms."

Ben's face flushes a little and he writes that down too. He looks back up at her. "Do you like fruit?"

She smiles. "I do."

"Good. What kind?"

Apparently Ben eats a lot of fruit salad for breakfast. For some reason Bev finds that idea charming—him going out and running, then coming back and drinking cold water and eating watermelon.

"Do you like avocados?" Bev asks.

He nods and adds them to the list. "Do you like avocado, strawberry, and poppy seed salad?"

"I'm looking to fail a test for opiates," Bev replies, nodding.

He accepts the joke for what it is, kisses her on the mouth, and promises to be back quickly. Eddie is still in the shower.

Bev finishes her coffee and then has water, for lack of anything better to do. She has nothing to do with her hands or her mouth, so she wants a cigarette, but there's no reason for her to have one. She's not stressed so much as she is... anticipatory.

Richie slouches out of the guest room in last night's clothes, looking like he crawled out of a pit to get here. He throws himself down on the bench next to her and, as if he can read her mind, groans, "If you're gonna have a smoke, can I stand next to you and breathe deeply?"

"Did you quit?" she asks, surprised.

"I quit everything," Richie says, which could be a declaration for the past or the present. He slumps sideways into her.

He definitely does not look like a man who has gotten his shit together. He looks like Richie, and he doesn't necessarily look happy, either.

Bev runs her tongue over the backs of her teeth. "Why were you screaming in the middle of the night?"

"Haystack crawled in bed with me. Sorry you had to find out this way, couldn't help myself." Bev elbows him and he groans a little. "Eddie just decided to pull a jump-scare at one in the morning."

"Mmm. You want a coffee?"

He lifts his head and stares at her like she's his personal Jesus. "Beverly Suzanne, that would be the best thing any human could offer me right now. Aside from a puff of your cigarette."

Bev rolls her eyes and gets up to pour him a mug while it's still hot. "My middle name isn't even Suzanne."

"I took a guess," Richie says. He squints and then frowns. "Your birthday's February thirteenth."

She nods.

He squints harder behind his glasses. “Does it start with an E?”

“It does,” Bev says. “I hate it.” Legally her name is, at the moment, Beverly Marsh Rogan. She’s going to have to do something about that.

“Ellipsis,” Richie guesses.

“Cute. No.” She slides the mug in front of him and he makes no effort to lift it, just stares at it.

“Elizabeth.”

“No.” She sits back down beside him.

“Edward.”

Bev smiles. “No.” She leans against him.

They can still hear the water running in the guest bathroom.

“Did you tell him?” she asks.

Casually, Richie stretches both arms over his head. He smells like liquor. He puts both hands under his chin and stares down into his mug. “Depends,” he says.

“On?”

“On what you mean.”

So he told Eddie *something*. “Anything,” she replies.

“Hmm. Specific.” For no apparent reason, he sticks his finger in his coffee and jerks it back out, popping it into his mouth. “Ersatz.”

“No. Did you just burn yourself?”

“Yep,” Richie says.

“Why?”

“Because I want—a cigarette.” He slumps a little lower, pressing at the heels of his hands with his temples.

“Eddie brought you painkillers?”

“Yep,” he says, popping the p.

Bev frowns at him, thinking. Remembering Richie as a child, his glasses just about to fall off his face, pushing them up with both hands like that. Maybe it’s that she dreamed of Stan as a child, that has her remembering, but in that moment the old face seems almost superimposed on the adult one.

“We went dancing,” she tells him.

Richie closes one eye and squints at her. “Who, you and Eddie?”

“You and me.”

“Last night? You should have told me.” Then he frowns, just as suddenly. “Holy fuck, we went dancing. When did we go dancing?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “It was the winter.”

“It was right before my birthday,” Richie says. “Wait, do I know how to fucking *swing dance*? ”

“I had left Derry by then,” she says. But she remembers it clearly—Richie adjusting those coke-bottle glasses (*one was made before refrigeration, the other was made after*) and taking hold of her hands, guiding her through a spin.

“I never took you dancing,” Richie says. “I took you to the movies and Ben showed up.”

“Yes, you screamed at me.”

“Yeah, I do that,” Richie says. “Shit. I’m gonna investigate this later when I can move my head without wanting to throw up. Ethel.”

“No.”

The water cuts off in the bathroom.

“Oh good, I thought he was trying to drown himself,” Richie says.

“He went running with Ben,” Bev says.

Richie says nothing but drums his fingers on the table, then takes a swallow of hot coffee. “Why were we dancing?”

“Did you dream last night?” she asks.

Richie smiles so broadly and so humorlessly, still staring down at the table, that Bev immediately decides to abandon this line of conversation. “Maybe,” he replies. “Echo.”

“No.”

“Eugenia.”

“Elvira,” Bev admits.

“Elvira,” Richie repeats. “Beverly Marsh, Mistress of the Dark.”

“That’s me,” she agrees dryly.

The bathroom door opens and Richie goes still, in a way that would be normal for anyone else and is deeply unsettling on him. Eddie comes out fully dressed, carrying a stack of clothing in his arms, and nearly trips over Ben’s couch.

Bev pretends not to see this. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Eddie replies. He glances at Richie, who does not look up.

Bev should have demanded Ben stay with her.

“Did you take the ibuprofen?”

Richie makes a vaguely affirmative noise.

“Did you drink the water?”

He repeats the noise.

Eddie exchanges a glance with Bev, who tries to project *I have no idea what's going on with either of you and I'm not the faintest bit interested in any of it*. He comes over and sits down opposite them at the table, on one of the barstools, and seems to wait.

Richie is doing his best to become a statue, it seems.

Bev sips her water. She should take a smoke break and excuse herself from the room.

“You know, if you’re hungover, you should really be trying to replace the water in your body instead of drinking coffee.”

Slowly Richie raises his head. Bev nearly bursts out laughing at the look on his face.

Eddie gets up and walks toward the fridge. “It’s basic science. Alcohol is dehydrating, but so is coffee, you’re just adding to the problem.”

Bev presses her lips together to keep from smiling.

“*Problem?*” Richie repeats.

Eddie rattles off a list of symptoms of dehydration, offers to refill Bev’s water glass, and insults Richie. Richie picks right back at him and ends up shouting about his dick, then clutching his head again.

“I’m going back to bed,” Bev announces, making to get up.

Eddie turns around with a look of honest desperation on his face. “Please don’t leave me in charge of him.”

Oh my god. Bev sits back down.

“So Mike’s applying to NASA,” she offers, though it was most likely a joke.

“Of course he is,” Richie mumbles. “You spend your whole life in Derry, you want to leave the fucking planet.”

“He’s already met an alien,” Bev points out.

“Shit, I should apply for NASA.”

“You absolutely should not,” Eddie says.

“They don’t tell jokes in space?”

“In the vacuum of space, no one hears you laugh,” Bev offers.

“No one laughs at me here, either.”

“I laugh at you every day,” Eddie says.

Richie flips him off with both hands.

“Richie knows how to swing dance but we can’t work out why,” Bev tells Eddie.

Eddie nods as though this surprises him not at all. “Richie cried when Guns and Roses broke up.”

Richie sits up with his mouth open in pure indignation.

“And when David Bowie died,” Eddie adds.

“That doesn’t count, everyone cried when David Bowie died,” Richie says, his face still utterly betrayed.

Richie looks to Bev for confirmation.

“I was sad,” Bev admits.

“So was I. I didn’t cry.”

“That’s because you’re a soulless monster,” Richie says.

Bev pushes her water across the table for something to do. “The point is, Richie and I went swing dancing at some point and we can’t work out when or why. I remember it in the winter, but I was already out of Derry by that fall.”

Eddie frowns, then his eyes widen. “The talent show,” he says. “There was a talent show.” He points accusatorially at Richie. “You wore a tie. You—” He gestures around his own head.

Richie interprets that gesture as, “...were crazy?”

“No, you tied it around your head, you looked like you were in a hair band.”

“I can’t have participated in a talent show,” Bev says. She frowns. “Unless I came back?”

Eddie frowns.

Richie adjusts his glasses. “Question, Bev—how many times did you hit me in the face with your hair when I was trying to figure out how to spin you without breaking your arms?”

She remembers that—that uncomfortable bend of her arm, followed by rapid apologizing. “That’s right,” she says. “I had hair. But—” She frowns harder. “Was it that winter? Did I know you before—everything happened?”

“I’d say I would have remembered that,” Richie says, “but I don’t know what the fuck I remember at all.”

Richie and Eddie get in the car, still bickering.

Ben feels awkward and oddly domestic as Bev wraps an arm around his waist and waves at the Escalade from the garage. Eddie waves back and then reverses out of the garage, and then they’re gone, and Ben’s alone with Bev.

She turns toward him, in their wake, and they’re alone, and will be for the foreseeable future.

He loves her. And he’s thinking about what Eddie said, about making a place. He looks at her and he can see lines appearing behind her head, sketching out built-in shelves, long windows. This is it, though. If she wants to go, she can go.

“Bed,” she says shortly.

Ben punches the button for the garage door. “Yes, ma’am,” he says,

as the machine rolls it down.

She laughs.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, you know how we've been adhering pretty rigidly to the plot and timeline of Eddie Lives so far? We've officially reached the point of divergence. I have no idea how long divorce proceedings under domestic abuse usually go, but I'm reasonably sure we're going to go past Christmas 2016, which will make this officially a sequel and not just a companion piece. And I have some scenes that I am *dying* to write, so here we go. Thank you for reading!

11. Outside the Courthouse

Summary for the Chapter:

Bev gears up for a fight. Ben loses his temper.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this one took a while, folks, I think my chapter-a-day schedule is officially over with--which is a bummer, but I knew it was unsustainable while it was happening. We're gonna keep going to the end of this story, though; and then I need to sit down and think hard about the last official installment in this series, because my gut instinct says it's going to be a oneshot and I don't know if I have the energy to wrassle with that.

Content warnings for this chapter: mentions of domestic violence (Tom and Bev's dad), an old woman with a shotgun, a dog named Fred who doesn't like men so much, disordered eating, mentions of gun violence, smoking, verbal abuse (Tom), gendered slurs (also Tom), violence. I'll repeat: there is on-screen violence in this chapter, not towards Bev, but it's there.

Bev's lawyer refers her to the district attorney's office.

ADA Amanda Johnson has white-blond hair ironed within an inch of its life, and her shirt is blood-red under her black jacket. She asks Bev what she wants to do, and listens, and does not make a single facial expression. Not when Bev is explaining what happened to Kay, and what happened when Bev decided to leave, and then the issue of the label; and not when Bev explains what happened the first time Tom hit her, or about the belt with the buckle taken off, or when she peels down the collar of her blouse and shows the burn scar above her breast. Bev feels at once that she is talking to a statue. The indifference is almost a relief.

“You have no children?” Amanda asks.

“No,” Bev says.

“No animals?”

“No. Just me.”

“Okay.” She hands Bev a red and white pamphlet from a stack on her desk. It has the number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline on the front, and announces *Safety Planning: Safety Plans Can Save Lives*. “What did you take when you left?”

Bev blinks once. “Driver’s license,” she replies. “One credit card in my name, it’s maxed out now. He cut off my other cards. Some clothes. That’s it.”

“Is your birth certificate and social security card back at the house?”

“Yes.”

“The marriage license?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she says. “You got out alive. Where are you staying?”

“With a friend.”

“Does he know about this friend?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

He knows that she knows a Mike; he knows that she knows William Denbrough; but Bev is certain nothing about Tom could ever anticipate Ben Hanscom.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay,” says Amanda. “The first step is filing a protective order.”

Bev licks her lips. “I don’t want him to have my address.”

“That’s because you’re smart,” Amanda replies, and explains the process of filing the protective order, the mandatory and permissive reliefs it can provide, and the emergency hearing she’ll have to have with the magistrate.

It’s seven hours from Chicago back to Ben’s place. They got up at six and drove in for the meeting at one; Ben offered to go in with her but she declined. Instead she sent him off to get them a hotel room. She was supposed to be done running already, but she isn’t. She waits in Amanda’s office after she texts Ben, waiting for him to reply that he’s in the parking lot. When she gets his text she walks down the back stairs and finds him waiting in the parking lot. They took the Cadillac this time—Ben means to take Mike’s truck to his mechanic, but Bev’s divorce is coming first.

She leans back in the passenger seat and feels a headache pounding in her temples.

“How did it go?” Ben asks, with the casual air that betrays his deep anxiety.

“About as well as can be expected,” she replies. “We’re going to do it.”

They go back to the room. It’s under Ben’s name, of course. It’s too early in the day for them to settle in, but Bev doesn’t know what else to do. She doesn’t like the feeling that she’s hiding, but of course she is. Crawling into her hotel room like a beetle under a baseboard.

“Amanda says I ought to have a code word,” she says. She throws herself backwards onto the bed and stretches her arms out on either side.

Ben is wearing a white dress shirt, a suit jacket, and jeans. He looks good, in spite of how he’s been worrying at his hair. Nice, casual, a little ruffled. “A code word?” he asks.

He’s not gonna like this. She takes a deep breath. “In case I’m in danger. And I need to *alert my family and friends*.” This last she

stresses as a quote—from Amanda and from the pamphlet on personal safety plans. “In case I need the police.”

The irony feels thick on her tongue. Police never did anything for her. How much of Derry’s collective choice to turn a blind eye was it and how much was indifference? When she closes her eyes she can remember running—from Henry Bowers, from her father—but when she remembers it there’s all this long hair streaming over her shoulders, and she never had long hair, she cut it off rather than let her father touch it. Slashing at it in the bathroom, muttering *fuck you* and crying. And then—and then—

The other side of the mattress sinks down and she opens her eyes. Ben’s there, his expression calm and serious. “Okay,” he says, ready to listen.

She grabs the open collar of his shirt and tugs him a little closer, just so that his head’s on her shoulder. She puts her face in his hair, smelling his shampoo and trying to ground herself in this hotel room.

She screamed and her father belted her for it, and then he looked at her, almost apologetic. *Is that it, Bevvy?* he asked. *Why didn’t you say so? I never would have hit you if I knew. All girls are scared of—*

“Spiders,” she murmurs. She can feel a certain unfamiliarity on her tongue—how long has it been since she said it?

Ben understands. He might not like it, but he understands. “Okay,” he says.

She thinks about who she wants to tell. Not the Losers; she doesn’t want to unpack the kind of animal that Tom was in front of them. Asking Eddie something in Ben’s kitchen, surrounded by the safety of the walls that he created, is one thing. But getting them on the phone specifically to say *Hey, if you ever see this in the group text I’m probably being beaten to death by the man I married, please call the Hemingford Home police...* No. Out of the question.

She calls Kay to tell her how the meeting went, and Ben lays on the other side of the bed. He doesn’t do anything except look at her, and it should make her feel... exposed. Scrutinized. Hunted. But it

doesn't. Never from Ben.

Ben schedules an appointment with his mechanic.

Her name is Rose. She's in her sixties, gray hair cut short, and she and her wife live as far out in the middle of nowhere as Ben does. When Ben pulls up with the truck, Rose leans out of the screen door and squints until he gets out. Then she shades her eyes with one hand.

"Ben Hanscom, is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He closes the door to the truck and smiles at her.

Over the years he's won her affection—and it took him a long time to identify it as such—by coming in regularly, never questioning her qualifications or her judgments, paying in full and on time, and not even blinking twice at the shotgun within her reach. The last time he brought the Caddy in for her expertise, she sent him off with a tupperware container full of pasta salad. *She says you're too skinny*, she said, and though she didn't name her wife specifically, Ben knew who she was talking about.

She's iron all the way through as she comes down into the yard, circling the truck.

"You didn't get that at the dealership," she says.

"No, ma'am," he agrees. "Bought it off a friend." Mike gave him an earful when he finally looked at the amount on the check, but Ben called him every day until he deposited it. "You wanna see the registration? I promise I haven't taken up car theft over the summer."

"God, I hope not," she says. She opens the passenger side door and stares down at the floormats, but says nothing. Ben genuinely can't tell if she can see the blood or not. She closes the door again and squints at him over the hood of the truck. "Whaddaya want with this?"

"My girlfriend likes it," Ben says. He's forty-one years old; he has a

girlfriend. Just saying it makes a flush of pleasure come over him—candy in his mouth, icing sugar on his tongue.

Rose raises an eyebrow at him. “Better than the Caddy?” she asks.

Ben laughs a little, because he’s stupid about his car and he knows it. It was vanity and status symbol and *I’ve made it*, half midlife crisis and half desperation to prove to his mom that he’d earned his independence and now he could take care of her, too. She ordered the vanity plate and gave it to him for his birthday one year, smiling as he peeled the box open.

Yeah, Bev likes the truck better than the Caddy, even with the blood and the gap in the dashboard like a missing tooth where the tape deck was. When they drove through Chicago in the Caddy her head sank lower, chin sinking toward her collarbone. People looked at them, and he thinks Beverly is tired of being looked at.

“Better than the Caddy,” he replies.

Rose raises her eyebrows. “Good for her,” she says. She jerks her head toward the shop and says, “You here to make an appointment?”

She never sees anyone without an appointment, and Ben’s not stupid enough to expect special treatment. He could have called, but part of him wanted to show Rose the car—like having her look at it proves it really exists.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay. Come on in, mind the dog. He might bark, he don’t like men so much.”

Ben lifts his eyebrows but follows her up the steps to the porch and through the screen door. He glances around and sees the dog sitting in the doorway to the living room. Some kind of shepherd, but bigger and darker than your standard K-9 unit. The dog growls when he sees Ben, but doesn’t otherwise move.

“New dog?” he asks Rose.

She leads him into the kitchen and dining room, pulling out her

appointment book and throwing it down on the table. “New girlfriend?” she asks.

They’re hardly comparable, but Ben answers her anyway. “Yeah.”

“Yeah. Donna’s brother—he’s got two kids, fourteen and seven, and the little one’s allergic to everything under the sun. He’s got the eczema—” She gestures at her own face, her eyes down and searching the table for a pen. “—all over, bleeding under his eyes and shit. Donna’s niece didn’t wanna give up the dog, but.” She shrugs. “People first, you know?”

He never had a dog growing up, but he cannot imagine there was anything his mother wouldn’t give up for him. It’s a parent’s job to save their kid’s life. He nods a little bit, glancing back through the doorway into the hall, where the dog is just sitting there, watching him.

“You feel any better out here, with him watching out?” Ben asks. Rose is tough as nails and fast when she points her gun at a man—and he’s seen her do it—but he’s not an idiot. When he walks in he sees the black and white brace they put up against the front and back doors at night, to keep people out.

“I mean, I got an alarm system,” Rose says. “Here—Fred, come here.”

Ben hears the click of nails on the hardwood as the dog gets up, and he takes a slight step to the side, out of the doorway, as the dog slinks past and under the table to approach Rose.

“Sit,” Rose says. There’s a thud as the dog sits, and then Rose stoops a little to scratch him. She looks back up at Ben. “You looking for a dog?”

Honestly, yes. He shrugs. “Maybe.” Depends on whether *don’t like men so much* means Fred the dog growls at strangers, or whether it means he’d like to bite Ben’s hand off.

“Donna’s hands hurt, hanging onto that leash,” Rose says. “Here, get down a little bit.”

Ben crouches onto his heels, feeling his knees creak, and looks at the

dog under the table. Rose leads the dog around the table and the dog creeps out, head down, then gives Ben a wary look. Ben doesn't reach out or anything, just folds his arms on his knees and waits. The dog growls a little again. Rose sinks her fingers into the ruff on the back of the dog's neck and then scratches at his ears.

"He don't bite," Rose says.

"He wants pet, he'll come over," Ben says. "Right?"

Rose grins a little. "Right."

Ben gets up and tries not to groan at the strain in his knees. It makes him think of the shin splints he had in high school, running for spite and with no experience or trainer there to tell him what he was doing wrong.

Rose schedules him for an appointment and shakes his hand on her way out. Ben glances over and finds Fred the dog watching him, ears pricked forward.

"You wanna bring the girlfriend by to look at him, you can when you bring the truck in," she says. "What's her name?"

"Beverly," Ben says. "I'll ask."

Rose nods and holds the screen door open. As he passes she says, "Ben Hanscom."

He turns on the steps to look at her, dog wedged against her knee in the doorway.

"I don't know what the fuck you did in that cab, but you better burn those floormats," she says.

Ben looks her in the eyes—just as gray as her hair—and nods slowly. "Yes, ma'am," he says. As he drives off he wonders if she'll call the police on him, but nothing happens.

When he gets back to the house he walks in through the garage and immediately smells roasting vegetables. He drops his keys in the bowl and says, "Hello?"

“Hey,” Bev calls back.

He walks into the kitchen and finds her at the stove, standing over a skillet. There are two chicken breasts cooking inside, slowly browning. He leans in and kisses her and smells cooking meat.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he says.

She shrugs. “Getting bored,” she admits. “You like chicken?”

They’re just plain chicken breasts, no breading or anything. He’s relieved.

“Yeah,” he says. He takes a step back and puts a hand up into his hair. “I know I’m kind of difficult to cook for,” he manages, rubbing at the back of his head.

“You like squash?” she asks.

He nods.

“We’re having chicken and roasted vegetables,” she says. “If it sucks, you don’t have to eat it.”

“It’s not gonna suck,” Ben says. He wants to reach out and touch her, so he slowly stands behind her, waiting for her to elbow him out of the way if she doesn’t want him to. His laptop is open on the counter next to her, pulled up to a recipe page. He carefully tucks his thumb inside her hip pocket; he hadn’t realized how cold his hands were until he felt how warm she was. He kisses her ear. “And we both know that I’m gonna eat it.”

Bev laughs. “Well if it comes out medium rare chicken, you better not.” She leans back into him, quiet acquiescence to the cuddling at the stove, and he feels better about coming up behind her. “You want to help?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, still on rural hospitality autopilot.

She laughs at him. “God, I love you,” she says, almost to herself, and Ben tucks his face into her shoulder. She reaches out and holds up a jar of sour cherry spread—it’s small, and it’s not something Ben

would buy on his own, which means she went out shopping specifically to prepare a meal for him. “Tablespoon of this, quarter cup of water. Come on, cowboy.”

He scrapes her hair out of the way to kiss her neck under her ear and make her laugh again—he loves her laugh, how loud and carefree it is—and then he goes into the cabinets to get a mixing bowl.

“So Rose has a dog,” he says.

“Rose your mechanic?”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t want Bev to feel pressured, but somehow these things seem to happen. Pieces falling into place. He can see the way that things line up and fit together. “She wants to know if you want to come with me when I drop off the truck, take a look at him. Apparently he prefers women.”

“Well, that could be a problem,” Bev says.

Ben shrugs and sets the bowl on the counter, pulling out the glass bowl. “He wasn’t vicious or anything. Rose says he was her brother-in-law’s dog, but that her nephew turned out to be allergic so they had to give him up.”

Bev turns the chicken in the pan. “Do you want kids?” she asks.

Ben, who was reaching for the sour cherry spread, feels his eyes pop and sets the jar down on the counter. “Do you?” he asks.

“I asked first,” she replies. She doesn’t look at him, just keeps stirring the chicken in the pan.

From dog to kids is a big leap. Is Ben sweating? He might be sweating.

“Uh,” he says slowly. He’d like to say he hasn’t thought about it, but he did, walking through the library. The librarian assistant looked at him suspiciously—and justifiably so, a strange man coming into the children’s library during storytime when there were child murders going on—and when she asked him what his son’s name was, he said *Ben Hanscom*. He probably wouldn’t name a child after himself, but

he doesn't know. "I—never thought it would happen for me," he admits.

"I'm forty-one, I'm not saying it's gonna," Bev says.

He stares at the ingredient list on the back of the jar: *sour cherries, granulated sugar, vanilla extract*.

"I—yeah," he manages.

She sounds amused. He always liked that laugh in her voice, half-mocking but sweet. "Yeah?"

He swallows. "Yeah, do you?"

She sighs through her nose. "Maybe once it's safe," she says.

He blinks once. Half of him wants to start building a fence around the property, both for the feeling of something to do to make her feel safer, something actionable, and for the idea that he can block out the whole world if she wants it. He can imagine it, suddenly—out in the backyard watching a kid stack cans on a brick fence that doesn't exist yet. Red hair, round cheeks. Drawing back a slingshot. The *ping* as the can drops off the fence and the kid wheels around and looks straight at Ben. Brown eyes, just like his.

He wants it all, suddenly, so badly that his heart clenches in his chest. He almost bows against the counter.

"Okay," he says. He realizes he's been stuck holding onto the jar for a while and he unscrews the top. "Did you say tablespoon?"

"Yes, not teaspoon," Bev says. "Did I freak you out?"

"No," he says honestly. "No, I just—" He sets the measuring spoons down and reaches out for her; he has to. Her head fits neatly under his chin when his arms fold around her.

"Okay, okay." They sway in place for a moment, the chicken sizzling in the pan. Bev puts her hand on his back. "I'm not trying to tell you anything or testing you, I just had a dream and I wanted to know."

“Good dream?” he asks.

She smiles. “Better than I’m used to.”

He lets her go and spoons a blob of the red cherry spread into the bowl. Bev reads the recipe aloud to him and instructs him on the water to add, and then on adding salt and pepper. She puts the chicken down on the cutting board and then adjusts the heat, then pours the sauce into the pan and stirs it.

The food is simple and it tastes good. The red sauce paints the chicken in one long stripe, and the squash sits on the plate in little golden crescent moons. He eats it and tries to dial back the *I love you* that wants to come out of him with every bite.

“Do you need to know calories?” she asks. “The website has them.”

“I, uh,” he says. He sets his knife down. “I can’t really be trusted with calories.”

She glances up, spearing a small piece of potato, and just listens.

“Because I have an idea of how many calories I can get away with eating, and so if it’s under a certain number my brain goes, *Oh, you can have more*, and then I just—uh.” He swallows. “I don’t stop. I.” It’s a perfectly normal serving size but he suddenly feels as though he’s about to start choking.

Bev’s left hand creeps across the table and reaches out for him. “I won’t tell you, then,” she says.

He takes a deep breath and says, “Okay,” and touches her hand with his fingertips. She intertwines their fingers and holds onto him. He looks down at the table and says, “So, uh, do you want to meet this dog? Because we can wait.”

“If I meet the dog that doesn’t necessarily mean committing to the dog, does it?” she asks, her mouth twisted wryly.

“Course not,” he says. “Meet Rose and Donna, too. They, uh, keep giving me pasta salad.”

“Food makes you nervous,” Bev surmises.

He takes a deep breath. “Yeah.” He knows the intersection of hospitality and food out here is well established. “Not when you make it, I just... It’s really nice that you—this is very...”

She runs her thumb over the back of his hand and he falls silent.

“I mean it, it’s good,” he offers. He appreciates her; it’s been a long time since he walked into his own house and had someone trying to take care of him. If that’s what this is—if she wasn’t just making food for herself and—

“Do you need help with the pasta salad?” Bev asks.

He nods. “I need a pasta salad hero.”

She smiles. “I will be your pasta salad hero, Ben Hanscom.”

“Well, thank you, Ms. Marsh.”

She laughs. They finish dinner. Ben does the dishes. He loves her.

The protective order goes through.

The magistrate grants Bev protection for one hundred eighty days. Her address is listed as the old house, which means that Tom continues to have no idea where she is. Tom is not permitted to possess a firearm or ammunition while the order is in place—though Bev has no idea if he went out and bought a gun while she was in Maine. He could have. If he wants her dead, it would be the most effective way to do it; but she somehow suspects he’d rather kill her with his hands.

(Sometimes she thinks about the nightmare she has, of Bill at his desk with his gun. But he’s in England, and the gun laws are tighter there, and she has no doubt that Bill would give her that incredulous and pained look if she asked him if he had one.)

Amanda calls Bev to tell her that her coworker—whose name Beverly

only remembers because it's Ben—successfully served Tom with copies of the petition and the protective order, meaning that the family court hearing has been scheduled.

Bev files for divorce in the Superior Court. She does not seek spousal support from Tom; she wants her company. It's her designs, but she imagines that he's sunk deep into the accounts. She goes out onto the back porch and smokes, staring at the bushes lining the pathway. How much effort would it take to tear them all out and start over?

There's a knock on one of the glass doors. Bev turns around. Ben is standing there, a green-lacquered dish in hand. Bev automatically moves to stub out her cigarette, but he opens the door.

"It's okay," he says. "I meant to get you an ashtray or something, I just forgot. Sorry." He sets the dish on the table.

"I should quit," she says.

Ben looks like he wants to reach for her, but he doesn't instead he wraps his arms around himself in the chill. The downside to those beautiful glass doors is that it's hard to keep heat in the house. The master bedroom is far better insulated, to the point where walking in and closing the door feels like stepping in from outside. There's a fireplace in the living room that they turn on in the evenings. Bev is wearing one of Ben's coats, feeling warm and safe, her upper body almost vanished in the suede.

"Only if you want," Ben says.

She'll never smoke in his beautiful house, but she's aware of the smell soaking into the fabric of his warm coat. Drawing on the cigarette makes her feel like she's doing something, even if it's just burning down the stick. Everything feels very far away and out of her hands—letting lawyers handle things.

Tom's lawyer has already put out a statement, accusing Bev of using abuse allegations to try to secure the company. Bev thinks of Kay's slashed face and the two felony charges of assault Tom already has outstanding, finishes her cigarette, and drops the butt in the celadon-green dish. She pulls out another and lights it with Ben's lighter.

“What do you need?” Ben asks.

She blows smoke into the air, but Ben’s breath is fogging too. It’s November.

“Does your mechanic follow celebrity gossip?” she asks.

Ben blinks once. “I strongly doubt it.”

“Think I’d like to meet that dog,” Bev says.

Kay calls her. She wrote an essay about Tom, and she wants Bev’s approval and Bev’s lawyers’ (she has a team now, which is frightening) approval before she posts it. Bev takes a deep breath and reads the first paragraph—which details visiting Bev at home and finding bloody linens, chunks of Bev’s hair ripped out and laying on the floor—and closes the article. Bev’s confident it then becomes a rousing condemnation of domestic violence. She just can’t read it.

She calls Kay back. “Post it,” she says. “I don’t mind.”

“You’re sure?” Kay asks. “I won’t, if you tell me not to. If it’s too much.”

“Well, talk to my lawyers,” Bev says. “If it helps get my label, I don’t care.”

Kay posts it. It circulates just days after Tom’s lawyer’s statement, along with some photos of Bev with a busted lip visible beneath her careful makeup.

There’s a lot of suspicion about why it took Bev so long to charge Tom with abuse. The fact that she ran, that no one has seen her since September, and that there were months of radio silence from her before she finally filed for divorce, makes people skeptical. Bev’s legal team has to address claims that she’s blackmailing Tom.

Tom is arraigned. Not for Bev’s charges, but for Kay’s. There’s a lot of public speculation about whether or not Tom will make some kind of plea bargain, about whether he’ll go on some talk show and make a heartfelt declaration of regret.

Bev thinks about how it felt to have him on the ground, bleeding like a stuck pig. How she wanted to turn away, but there was something inside her that... *liked this just fine*. That was how she felt, watching him roll on the floor and scream. She liked it just fine.

She knows Mike is watching the news—the same way he watched all of them from a distance, from his loft in Derry in the dark for decades. Now, at least, she hopes he's out in the sun. He calls her, but he sounds almost deliberately casual about it.

That's what Mike does. He has plenty going on under the surface. The problem is that he's somewhere between Ben and Richie. Ben is quiet enough that his silences sometimes have to mean something, and when she asks now he tells her what's going on in his head. Mike, on the other hand, collects and asks questions and gives every impression of being extremely engaged—and then you walk away from a conversation realizing he confided very little about himself.

She expected the call, to be honest.

"Hey, Mike," she says.

"Hey, Bev," he replies. "How's Nebraska?"

"Quiet," Bev replies honestly. It's a relief so thick she hardly knows what to do with it. Pull it down over her like a blanket? Wipe it away like steam on a mirror? "How's Florida?"

"Not bad, not bad. I'm working on my tan."

Bev laughs. "Oh, are you?"

"Yeah, I got my Kindle, I got a big floppy hat, I'm a regular beach bum now."

Bev laughs a little, thinking of Mike relaxed and living in the tropics. "No surprise alligator attacks?"

"Not yet. Knock on wood."

"Just chilling?"

“Mmm, writing a little,” he replies.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah—Bill suggested it, actually. I’ve got a blog now. Can you believe it? I’m old, and I have a blog.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Travel writing,” he says. “Impressions of a black man who’s never left Maine, suddenly in the Sunshine State.”

Bev smiles a little. Much as she loves Kay, she’d rather read Mike’s blog than the editorial about her marriage and her husband. “It getting any traction?”

“Absolutely not,” Mike says. “I’m not about to become the new Amitav Ghosh on WordPress.”

Bev has no idea who Amitav Ghosh is and lets Mike be very much a librarian about *In an Antique Land*, speaking critically about Islamophobia and searching and expectations. She waits for a free moment and then asks, “Is it all travel writing?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Mike says. “I got national parks to see, Starbucks mugs to collect.”

“Oh, you and Eddie,” Bev says, because Richie now takes one genre of photo and it’s Eddie drinking increasingly froufrou drinks at Starbucks, scowling over his whipped cream as Richie mugs for the camera.

“Yeah, he’s a real inspiration,” Mike says, and they laugh a little bit.

“So are you going to start crossing places off your list or are you going to linger a little longer in the sun over the winter?” Bev asks.

Mike pauses and says slowly, “Well, I was thinking about coming out again before Richie’s birthday.” Eddie has created a second group text and arranged a surprise party. At this point Bev doesn’t know in what state her divorce will be by Christmas, but she told Eddie she was in, and if she’s in, then Ben’s in.

"Out to L.A.?" she asks dryly, knowing the answer he's gonna give.

He doesn't disappoint her. His voice is gentle when he says, "I've never been to Chicago."

Bev switches the phone to her other hand and glances across the house. Ben is fussing with a Dutch oven and a cut of meat from the freezer out in the garage, and he glances reflexively at her, smiling and raising his eyebrows.

She smiles back at him and looks at him as she asks Mike, "So would that just happen to coincide with my testimony in divorce court, or...?"

There's a pause, and then Mike laughs. "Yeah, I'm not gonna fool you. Look, we stood up with Richie. We'll stand up with you, if you'll have us."

Bev finger-combs her hair. As is frequent, when it comes to the matter of Tom, she's of two minds. The first wants him far away from anyone he could hurt to hurt her, and doesn't want any of them to know more than they have to about the kind of mess Bev got herself into. The second imagines with almost ravenous joy the kind of rage on Tom's face if she showed up with six—

Five, she reminds herself. There are only five of her boys left. And they're men now, and she's not a little girl to chase them around in the Barrens before lunch, under the sun.

(*You been playing with boys, Bevvy?*)

She looks at Ben, who straightened up as soon as she said *divorce court* and is watching her—not guiltily, because she's not mad he's been talking to Mike about how she's doing, she's really not, but with great alert. He wants to know she's okay. That's all any of them would want. She's convinced that if all of them were in the courtroom with her, she'd be... invincible. Nothing would be able to hurt her, least of all a man.

Even Bowers had to try to pick them off one by one.

"I don't want to make it a whole thing," she says.

She hasn't told Ben what bile the tape deck spewed at her, while it spat blood into the car. She isn't convinced she wants him in the room while she testifies. She knows that Tom's lawyer is going to accuse her of... of all manner of things. And the last time a boy grabbed his junk and talked about how he'd done Beverly Marsh, Ben *roared* and threw a rock at him.

"I know," Mike says. "But you say the word, and I'm there. Doesn't even have to be the whole gang—not like I have a day job to take off from. You and me and Ben—the outsiders ride again."

Bev laughs. "I'll keep that in mind," she says. Amanda says she's pressing for a closed gallery, trying to keep some of the media attention off of this, but they're already riding the wave from Kay's suit and photos in the press. She's not optimistic about their odds. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Mike says.

She swallows. "If they report what I say he did to me. In court. If they put that in the news. Could you... not read it?"

Mike pauses. Then he says, "Yeah, Bev. I promise."

Ben takes the truck to Rose's.

He threw out the floormats. Bev drives the Caddy, following him along the rural route and backroads without issue. When he looks at her in the rearview she smiles and tosses her head, and all her flies around in the breeze from the open windows.

They pull up in the yard outside Rose's place. Rose comes down the steps and when Ben steps out of the truck, she calls, "Donna, it's Ben Hanscom back again."

The screen door opens and Donna—her hair is long and gray instead of short and gray like her wife's—leans out, but before she can step outside the dog darts out and down the steps.

Ben has a very clear moment of thinking *Oh shit* and being glad that

Bev's still in the car, before Bev opens the driver's side door of the Caddy and climbs out. The dog runs straight at her, head down, like a dark missile.

And then it sits, maybe five feet away from Bev. Its butt hits the ground and it *stares* intently at Beverly, tail wagging. Its head strains forward, and it seems to vibrate with intensity, but it comes no closer.

"Hello," Bev says, sounding delighted.

The dog's tail wagging intensifies. It keens softly.

Ben steps around the truck, relieved now that it's probably not going to hurt her, and resists the urge to loop an arm around her. "This is Rose," he says, indicating Rose, who has come to the bottom of the steps and folded her arms across her chest. "And that's Donna." Donna waves from the patio.

"And that's Fred," Donna calls from the porch.

"Hello, Fred," Bev says, her voice as kind as it was on the first day Ben met her.

Ben's chest hurts, suddenly. The way it did when she just about knocked him out in his kitchen, as he tried to come up with a good answer to *Do you want kids?*

Fred the dog appears to vibrate even harder.

Bev moves slowly, crouching in front of him, and the dog whines again. He doesn't move until she reaches out and touches him, and then he moves fast—Ben jerks, he's so startled—and just about climbs into Bev's lap, tail beating the ground. Bev's hands sink into his fur, fingers scratching his ears. Fred the dog throws himself to the side and lays with his belly facing Bev, back leg kicking as Bev administers rubs.

"Ben, come here," Bev says.

Knowing what Rose said about Fred not liking men, Ben glances up at Rose and Donna on the steps.

"He's safe," Rose says. "We wouldn't take him, if he weren't."

Ben approaches Bev as carefully as he did in the kitchen, though instead of a spitting pan now there's some eighty pounds of dog she's attending to. The dog looks at Ben as he gets closer, stops rolling back and forth, but its tail continues thumping.

Bev reaches out with her left hand, right still rubbing under Fred's chin, and takes hold of Ben's palm. He lets her guide his hand over, and when she prompts him he folds his hand around hers, showing Fred his knuckles. Fred sniffs his hand, licks them once—surprising sweep of hot tongue—and then lays down.

"Ah, hell, I think that's my dog," Bev mumbles. "He's a good boy. Yes."

Ben looks up at Rose, who's giving a thin smile.

"You better show me that truck, Ben Hanscom," Rose says. "Let's pretend I'm a professional here."

Ben straightens up. Fred rolls away from him, and Ben moves carefully around Bev so as not to step right over the dog. Once Ben passes out of range, Fred lies back down and allows Bev to keep scratching his ears.

Rose surveys the inside of the truck. "You had a tape deck in there?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"Did you take it out yourself?"

"A friend did," Ben asks.

Fred looks at them reproachfully as Ben and Bev get back in the car. Bev smiles. It's uncomplicated joy, playing with the dog. Ben likes to see it on her—not shaded by any past experience or memory.

"So that dog," Ben says slowly.

Bev pushes her hair out of her face. "You didn't touch him."

“He didn’t growl at me this time,” Ben says. “I call that progress.”

“He licked you.”

“He did.”

She leans back in her seat. The wind pulls at her hair and she rolls the window up, instilling the Caddy with quiet.

“Do you want a dog? Or would you get a boa constrictor if I said I wanted one?”

Ben raises his eyebrows. “Do you want a boa constrictor?”

“You know what I mean.” Her expression is amused rather than irritated, but there’s a kind of wariness in her eyes.

“I told you, I thought about it,” he says honestly.

He did—he used to imagine, especially in the days after his mom died, having a reason to get up at a certain time in the morning, a reason to take meals at specific hours, a reason to go outside. He found it in work, not in a living thing, but he used to imagine—out running around that track he beat into the ground with his feet—maybe not running by himself. Not something chasing him, but maybe running ahead. He won’t ask Bev to do that in this weather, but shepherd dogs need a lot of exercise. They’re smart, they’re active. With how frequently Ben has to travel, he couldn’t justify having an animal dependent on him.

Do you want kids?

“Maybe a buddy to go sprinting through the woods with,” he says.

Bev grins. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You can throw a tennis ball like twenty miles down that hill,” he says.

She laughs. “Yeah.” Ben can imagine one in her hand, the seemingly effortless flick of her forearm from her elbow, dog tripping over itself as it takes off after the fluorescent green arc.

(Secretly, he imagines a kid with her throw. Red hair, curls, bright purple little league jersey, *Hanscom* on the back. It's so vivid he feels like he's thirteen years old again, imagining defending Beverly from threats he knows nothing about. He tries to put the fantasy back in the box, but he can imagine red dirt and standing up and cheering in wire-bound stands, and serious brown eyes staring at him as the kid practices, throwing the ball straight into a mitt in Ben's hand.

Ben never thought to hope any child of his would be athletic. What's he going to do if his children get bullied in school for being fat? What's he going to do if he has a daughter who comes home in tears from a first date and refuses to tell him what happened? He's getting ahead of himself.)

"So that dog specifically?" Bev asks. "We could find one who's nicer to you."

His brain helpfully fills in the mental image of Bev holding a puppy. It's getting difficult to drive. He needs to focus.

"Gonna need to learn a little bit more about what he'd do if he had no one but me for company," Ben says. He's not going to take a dog into his house if just being around him is gonna stress it out.

"Mm-hmm," Bev agrees.

He glances over at her. Her elbow's up on the door, just under the window, and she's playing with her hair absentmindedly.

"If you could live anywhere in the world," he says, "where would you want to live?"

She smiles, and then ducks her head and smiles wider. "You're gonna laugh."

"I won't laugh," he says. She could say *Anaheim* and he'd go home and search for lots on his computer.

She laughs, then. "You should laugh, it's silly."

"I won't laugh. I won't! Promise."

She tilts her head all the way back and says, “With you.” And then she laughs, reclined against the passenger seat of his car.

He doesn’t laugh, but he smiles, and not because it’s funny. He’s just so damn happy. He loves her, he loves her, he loves her.

Amanda said they could sneak Bev in and out the back exit of the courthouse, when it came time to testify.

Ben asked if she wanted to take the truck or the Caddy. He was watching her assemble her wardrobe. It felt like the inverse of wedding dress shopping—*this is the suit I’m going to get divorced in*. She knew she had to present a certain face—vulnerable, the battered woman, pretty enough to make any random commenter online feel guilty for trying to blame her when it’s documented her husband beat not just her but also Kay. Her blouse and pants are white; her blazer is ecru. She wears Ralph Lauren and not her own work.

“The Caddy,” she says. It’s easy to adopt his name for it, silly as it is. She half thinks of it as a woman’s name—*Oh, this is the Bohemian Girl, and this is Beverly, and this is Caddy*.

Ben seems to understand what she wants. She needs the armor, because she’s going to say horrible things today and they’re all true, and she needs to be someone outside of herself when she does. She can’t be thirteen-year-old Beverly Marsh, whose father belted her across the face when she screamed in the bathroom, and then apologized because *all girls are scared of spiders, I’d never have hit you if I’d known, why didn’t you say so?*

She is—for the moment—Beverly Marsh Rogan, and she needs to look like a fashion designer when she sues her husband for the company. She needs to look beautiful, but delicate. She doesn’t want anyone to see the wild girl with the slingshot, or the rock leaving her palm, underneath.

“I don’t need to sneak in and out,” Bev told Amanda. There will be paparazzi on her. She has the luxury of how damn hard it’s going to be for Tom to get her alone, and Tom is a lot of things, but he’s most

dangerous when he's not stupid. He's not going to take a swing at her in front of all those eyes.

This isn't just ending her marriage. This is putting on a show.

Ben wears a suit. He looks very nice. It's hard to focus on it, as they approach the courthouse. They're supposed to meet the other Amanda's colleague, the other Ben, Ben Cross, before proceeding into the courthouse.

Mike offered again to come out to Chicago with them. Part of her thinks it would be nice, to walk in with Ben and Mike, both over six feet, flanking her.

(*Show me what you were gonna do with Mike.*)

There are cameras just lining the way. Sometimes Bev thinks she really should have moved to New York for work, but then she thinks of how the ravenous media would have just raked through her whole marriage by now. She never would have made it, bloody and barefoot, out of her house if she were in New York City. Chicago seems to have showed up today in an effort to make up for that.

Ben turns his head to her. "Are you okay?" he asks.

She nods. She can't answer him with words; something's happening inside her, something receding, pulling back like the tide going out.

When she called Mike, he said that he'd been walking along the beach at night. *Nothing makes you feel more insignificant in the whole world than the beach at night*, he says. *All that water in the dark. I've never had a problem the beach in the dark couldn't just swallow up.*

She scans the rows of flashing cameras. Every face looks like Tom's, at first, and then she takes a deep breath. There's a man turned away from the walk, talking to someone, and Bev checks the line of his shoulders, but it's not him. She would know Tom on the beach at night, just by the way he walked. Stumbled, if he was drunk; the way he came straight towards her, if he was angry, quiet as a missile.

Ben says, "Let me come around, open your door, and we'll walk in together."

She holds her little clutch purse in her hands and nods.

Ben gets out and walks around the car. There are cameras flashing—they can see into the passenger window where Beverly sits, not looking at them but letting the lights go off. Ben blocks the whole space with his body, trying to shield her, but there are a lot of angles. She looks up and meets his eyes.

He opens the door just a crack. “Are you ready?” he asks.

She takes a deep breath. “It’s the teenage werewolf,” she says.

He understands. He opens the door.

There’s a wall of sound. Not so bad as fashion week—Bev’s been in bigger crowds. She’s just self-conscious, that’s why. She holds her clutch against her ribs and lets Ben take her arm. They take steps together—small for Ben, but wide enough for Bev to be businesslike and unconcerned.

The courthouse doors open and Kay appears at the top of the steps. She waves to Beverly.

Bev smiles and lifts her chin, and then—

There have to be dozens of paparazzi calling her name, but she hears Tom’s voice call out, “Beverly,” and she feels her arm tighten around Ben’s, so Ben knows.

Ben turns his head. “Keep going,” he murmurs to her.

Kay, at the top of the courthouse steps, has a mean look on her face, staring out behind Bev. One of her arms reaches out, like she can grab Bev out of reach and usher her to safety.

You married him, Bev tells herself. You married him because you loved him. You loved a man who could do that to you, how does that make you feel?

“Wait,” she says to Ben, and turns. Ben doesn’t like it, but he stills.

Tom stands several yards behind them, one hand in his suit pockets.

He stands as though he has no intention of going anywhere, of following her or of leaving the courthouse; he could be a statue.

He is just a man.

He is not an alien, or a clown, or a witch, or her father. He's just a man.

She looks at him with the contempt she feels for herself, for choosing him, for staying as long as she did, and then she turns and keeps walking toward the steps, her arm in Ben's.

"You wanted a scene, Beverly? You wanted a scene?" Tom shouts after her.

She stops and turns back.

"You got your fucking scene," he says. He takes his arm out of his pocket and gestures at the reporters; his jacket rides up and she can see the belt he's wearing. It's not the belt, the belt he used on her—that one won't hold up pants anymore, anyway, not since he took the buckle off. "Here's your fucking scene, Beverly, you and that *bitch* up there, and who the fuck is this?"

Bev inhales slowly, still staring at him. There's doubt on his face, under his rage. Bev doesn't feel anything at all except a slow throbbing triumph, remembering the way Kay laughed on the phone, *I got him for you, Bev, I got him*, and she understands it now.

"We can go," Ben says in her ear. "We can just walk right in."

And somewhere, in the back of her mind, she hears thirteen-year-old Bev getting ready. Drawing back the cup of the slingshot, her hand clasped over the cup, so who knows that it's empty? It doesn't matter. *I'm not afraid of you*, she told It, and she meant it, and It had to take her somewhere else to be afraid.

Her husband's in her sightlines. She can hear the stretch of elastic, feel the give of it under her forearm.

"Bev," Ben murmurs.

Bill Denbrough's eyes look down hers from a distance of thirty years.
Kill It, Bev.

Last time pays for all, Bev thinks to herself, and wants to smile. Instead she says simply, “You don’t exist.”

She has to watch it land. Can’t help herself.

Tom goes satisfyingly *white* when she says it. Bev lifts her chin, half-lids her eyes like she’s bored, and turns her back on him. She looks up at Kay, who is watching her with a grim expression on her face, her nostrils flared now she’s confronted with the man who cut her. He’s just a man—he’s not a demon or an alien or a clown, he’s just a man, and Bev hates him, but she’s not afraid of him anymore, she’s safe, she’s—

“*You whore!*” Tom shouts. “You think you can—you *think you can just*—” But Beverly *can* just, she can just walk away. “I don’t need this shit, Beverly! I don’t care what you think you’re doing, you *numb cunt*, I don’t need this shit!”

Ben stiffens—he’s pissed, she can tell, just from the indrawn breath he takes, but Tom melting down outside the courthouse is good for them, she’s sure. She’s never studied public relations but she knows bad optics when she sees it—hears it.

Kay says, “Bev! Watch!”

Bev whips around and Tom’s going for her. She overplayed her hand. She knows that lunge—the silent one, the one to distract and stun, the way he came at her and she had nothing to throw at him so she had to flip the vanity. She means to step out of the way but she’s holding tight to Ben’s arm, and she twists her ankle, and he can’t—he’s a fool, he can’t do that, he’s not supposed to be stupid enough to do that in front of people, in front of cameras, he can’t—

And it doesn’t matter how brave Bev thought she was, or what she did while she was in Maine, or what she did while she was a kid, because there’s always another monster, there’s always another *It*, and Bev makes them herself, so there’s no escaping.

"Right," Ben says, his voice calm, and then he lets go, turns, and punches Tom in the stomach.

His arm fits right beneath Tom's outstretched one as he reaches for Beverly, and, like he forgot that Ben was there at all, he takes the blow in the gut and doubles over.

Bev staggers backwards, horrified.

Ben's face has changed not at all, and it doesn't when he throws an elbow into the top of Tom's spine, either.

Tom drops like a stone. Bev knows what that looks like, knows how he knelt suddenly when she belted him in the balls, knows how he rolled on the floor to grab his bloody knee. She knows those cords in his neck, the grimace on his mouth as he hits the sidewalk outside the courthouse. There is a spray of cameras.

Ben takes several steps back and raises both hands over his head, his fingers splayed wide. Bev covers her mouth with her hands, staring at him.

Kay is suddenly right by Bev's side. "Come on, Bev," she says.

"No," Bev says.

"Bev, we gotta go. Come on."

Men in black uniforms are running towards Ben and Tom. Bailiffs or police or something. Ben doesn't resist as they wrench his arms behind his back. There's a jangle of silver cuffs. He lifts his head and looks around for Beverly; his eyes are soft.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Bev can't say anything.

"We have to go. Right now, Bev." Kay begins to tow her backwards towards the courthouse.

"I'm sorry," Ben repeats, and they take him away.

Bev walks into the courthouse without him, feeling like her armor's gone and someone's ripped her shield out of her hands.

Notes for the Chapter:

Uh... yeah, there's a lot there. Thank you so much for the comments I continue to get on this and on Eddie Lives, I really appreciate them, they make my day and are my reason for getting on the Internet in the morning.

12. Out of Spite

Summary for the Chapter:

A Chicago police precinct, a poem by a mysterious stranger, and help from the Cook County Legal Aid office. A phone call, a dream, a grilled cheese, and a history of Ben Hanscom's spite houses.

Notes for the Chapter:

So wow, this chapter did not turn out the way I thought it was going to. Also it's SUPER self-indulgent in places, I hope the rest of you are as entertained as I am. Keep in mind I've never been arrested or had to post bail for someone else, so please forgive the artistic license here.

Content warnings: Ben is EXTREMELY self-loathing in this chapter, there's a surprise cameo and the first commenter to identify him gets 10 points, Ben has a little bit of a flashback, more mentions of domestic abuse (Tom), discussions of infidelity, suicide imagery (Stan). Uh, I read back through what book! Ben says about his high school track coach, and I think the encounters he described qualify as both child abuse and sexual assault? So, like, be aware of that, guys. Also the major problems established last chapter are not resolved, we're gonna have to keep going for that, this chapter is putting gauze on the gaping stab wound.

Ben fucked up.

He has plenty of time to think about it. They didn't bother sticking him in a holding cell; they just handcuffed him to a bench in the station. He just sits there, arms behind his back, dwelling on the look on Beverly's face when she put her hands over her mouth.

As soon as he did it, he knew he'd fucked up. Fucked with her case,

certainly. But also—Stan's head, in the Neibolt house, he lost it a little bit, and he turned around and found her crouching over Richie, putting his glasses back on his face for him, staring at Ben like she'd never seen him before.

He went after a child—well, recognizable as a child—like he was the murderer in a slasher movie. He would swear the blood hovered. He's not proud of it.

She looked at him like that. Like she'd known, all along, that he had the capacity to do something like that, to be as violent as every other man in her life. He walked in thinking he was better, and then what did he do?

In front of paparazzi. Great. Fantastic. Definitely not going to affect her trial for domestic abuse at all. *Way to fucking go, Hanscom. You can do all those sit-ups, but you're still fat in your mind. Still just a fatboy.*

He kept it together pretty well until her husband went for her—and what kind of idiot would he have to be, to go after Beverly in front of cameras? *Oh, I don't know, Hanscom, maybe the same kind of idiot to punch out her husband in front of cameras? In front of the courthouse? Right before she's supposed to testify?*

He had one job, and it was to support her. Hold her arm while they walked in. Make eye contact with her while she's on the stand, when that piece of shit's defense attorney is asking her questions. Let her know she's not alone.

You're still just a fatboy, he thinks. Still just a kid who can't stand to see bigger bullies come after her, still want to be the hero and fuck what everyone else needs, it's all about you, you, you. And then—he couldn't wait. Couldn't wait for her to finally show up that bastard, couldn't wait for her to take him down herself, he had to swoop in like that kid who can't stop shoveling candy in his mouth, because it would be nice to get a smile from a pretty girl but the candy's right there within his reach.

He waits. He kind of feels like he should be offered a phone call, but no one's offering him one, and maybe that only happens if you're

sent to jail properly.

An old man with a long face and oval-shaped glasses is watching Ben from the other Bench. Ben didn't think he'd meet a septuagenarian in a police station today, but it turns out he didn't expect a lot of things today. The man has a receding hairline, no discernible upper lip, and he's studying Ben like Ben's the most interesting thing that has happened to him today. He's wearing, of all things, a Red Sox t-shirt.

"You look like you're having a hell of a day," the man says, his voice higher than Ben expected. It creaks like a door opening.

Ben thinks about lawyers, about police provocateurs, and about plausible deniability.

"You could say that," he admits.

The man studies Ben's suit. "What'd you do, art theft?"

Ben glances down at his own collar and says, "Probably better if I get that straightened out with my lawyer first, huh."

"Yeah, probably," the man says. "Name's Steve."

"Ben," Ben replies. "Are you having a hell of a day too?"

"Eh," Steve says. "I have a lot of weird days. You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

Ben thinks of clowns and realizes he's smiling, suddenly, widely, and without humor. "Yeah, I know that feeling," he says, and looks down at his shoes.

There's a long silence.

Then Steve says, "You don't talk much, do you?"

Ben says, "You could say that, too."

"Eh, that's all right," Steve says. "It's important to know exactly what you mean to say, and then say it."

Ben offers him a smile, a bit grimmer and sincerer than his last. “I try.”

They wait and then Steve asks, “Where you going after this?”

Ben shrugs a little, feeling his hands behind his back. “Beg forgiveness?”

“Oh,” Steve says in a tone of sudden and complete understanding. “A woman. Or—” He tilts his head slightly. “A man?”

“A woman,” Ben allows.

Steve nods. “How old are you?” He squints at Ben from behind his glasses. “Thirty-eight?”

“Forty-one,” Ben replies.

“No,” Steve says, disbelieving.

Ben nods. “Yes, sir. Back in June.”

“Well that can’t be right.” Steve seems to consider him for a moment. Then he says, *“The thinnest bear is awakened in the winter.”*

Ben stares at him. After a long moment he says, “I’m sorry?”

Steve shakes his head. “Just something you reminded me of. My wife said it. She’s a historian. There’s this saint, and he compares himself to a bear, but he writes about... giving up the self.”

Ben has no idea what to make of this.

“You look like you don’t got a lot of self left, kid,” Steve says.

Ben leans back on the bench, as much as he can without crushing his own arms and cutting off his circulation. “You’d be surprised.”

“Oh, you could say that,” Steve says. He folds his hands—he’s got hard calluses on the insides of his fingers, warping his ring finger towards his middle—and drums his thumbs together. “What do you do?”

“I’m an architect,” Ben says.

“No kidding,” Steve says, nodding. “Build anything I’d know about?”

Ben shrugs. “This radio communications tower, most recently. It’s overseas, nothing local.”

Steve nods again, slowly. “Not bad, not bad. I’m a writer.”

“Anything I’d know?”

Steve squints at him. “You read horror?”

“Some horror,” Ben allows. “My friend writes it.”

“Oh, anything I’d know?”

“William Denbrough,” Ben says. “His big one’s, uh, *The Black Rapids?*”

Steve snorts. “You think I can write horror and not know about William Denbrough? You’re friends with William Denbrough?”

It occurs to Ben that maybe he shouldn’t associate Bill’s name with Ben being held in a police station after assaulting Beverly’s husband.

“Yeah, we talk a lot,” Ben says. “Pretty recently.”

Steve shakes his head. “That wife of his. She about to leave him?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Ben says, which is what he would say even if he did know anything about Bill’s marriage.

“Yeah, I suppose not,” Steve says. “She’s older than him, right?” He shakes his head. “I met my wife in college. She wrote that: *the thinnest bear is awakened in the winter. Here is a bear’s song in the cool-scented snow.*”

“Is she a poet?” Ben asks.

Steve nods, the curl of his mouth turning proud. “She is indeed.”

Ben wants to fidget, to drum his hands on the arm of the bench. “My

girlfriend likes poetry,” he says. If he’s still allowed to call her that.

“You better start composing, then,” Steve says.

Ben laughs and looks down. “Yeah. I guess I better.”

“You know what that poem’s about, son?” Steve asks.

Ben lifts his eyes. Steve’s leaning forward now, and he’s not handcuffed to the bench, just looking very intent. He made a guess at how old Steve is, but either way it has to be more than forty-one, and people call him son out here anyway.

“No, sir,” he replies.

“My wife wrote it,” Steve says, “about... *mankind’s troubling and wonderful habit of dreaming the right dream...*” His words are slow, his tone definitely quoting, and his eyes flick up toward the ceiling as he tries to recall exactly. “*...at the wrong time.*” Quote finished, he looks back at Ben. “You know anything about that?”

Ben thinks about it. “Maybe,” he allows at last. He’s had a lot of dreams. He’s had a lot of wrong times.

“*Troubling and wonderful,*” Steve repeats with great certainty. “*Troubling and wonderful.*” He stands up. “Can I get you something from the vending machine, kid? I can hold a Snickers bar up to your mouth if you need it.”

Ben smiles at being called kid. “No thank you, I’m good.”

“You sure?” Steve shakes his head slowly. “All right.”

And then he leaves. No one comes to collect him or anything, he just leaves. Ben turns his head and watches him exit the police precinct’s front doors, and no one stops him, he just goes.

Ben blinks twice, thinking, *What the fuck was that?*

A detective comes downstairs and uncuffs him. He’s businesslike, seems unconcerned about Ben’s actual actions, and just has him sit in a chair next to his desk as he types up paperwork. Ben provides his

name, his date of birth, his address, and all his other personal information without issue. When the detective asks him what happened, Ben demurs and asks to speak to his lawyer.

“Sure,” says the detective. “Do you have a lawyer?”

Ben has a number of lawyers. “Uh, most recently, Amanda Johnson at the district attorney’s office?” he offers, because even if she won’t represent him, she’ll definitely want to know about this.

The detective gives him a funny look. “ADA Johnson is your lawyer?”

“Most recently, yes,” Ben says, because the alternative is calling any of the real estate lawyers who work at his firm, or Henry Deaver down in Florida. And Ben’s not on trial for murder, and Deaver specifically instructed the Losers not to need him.

The detective takes out his cell phone, looks up Johnson’s number, and dials. After several long moments he looks at Ben and rolls his eyes, then mouths, *Voicemail*. He waits and then says his name and the precinct number he’s calling from, and then says, “We have a Mr. Benjamin Hanscom here claiming you represent him, please call back once you get this message.” He gives his extension and then his partner’s as well, and then closes the call and looks at Ben. “Well, you’re booked,” he says. “You want to make a phone call?”

Bev’s busy. For a moment Ben’s brain scrambles, trying to remember a single other living human being who would care that he’s being held in a police precinct.

Then he closes his eyes and wants to kick himself.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Okay,” the detective says casually, and holds the phone out to him.

Richie picks up on the third ring. “Yellow,” he says.

“Hey Rich, it’s me,” Ben says.

“Haystack! Are you a telemarketer now? Did the architecture thing fall through? Is this some kind of weirdly proactive phone sex line?”

“I’m under arrest,” Ben says.

Richie actually goes quiet for a moment. Then he says, “Benjamin Suzanne Hanscom, am I your one phone call?”

Ben blinks and decides to let *Suzanne* pass by. “Uh, yeah,” he says.

“And not a fucking *lawyer*? God, smart people are dumb.”

“No, she’s in court right now,” Ben says. “With Bev. In court. Right now.”

There’s a pause, and Richie uses Eddie’s intonations exactly when he says, “What the fuck did you do.” It’s not even a question, it’s just disappointment.

“Uh, well. I don’t want to tell you that, with this very nice detective listening,” Ben says. The detective smiles at him, apparently accepting the compliment. “But I can tell you that if it’s not in the news already, it probably will be. Not under my name. Under her name.”

There’s a click and then Richie’s voice becomes echoey. Ben understands he’s been put on speakerphone. “The fuck did you do?” Richie demands, in his own voice. And then, “Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Ben says.

“Oh my god, they got you from like, *five angles*, this is...”

“Yeah,” Ben says, afraid Richie’s going to start complimenting him. “So Bev’s in court right now. And I think, justifiably, she might be a little freaked out. So can you...” He closes his eyes. “I can’t talk to her right now, but can you reach out and, if she needs to talk...”

“Do what I always do?” Richie finishes. “Start talking?”

Ben’s thinking of Bev on the phone after the mess with the tape deck, laughing while her hand’s still shaking and setting the little nimbus of smoke from her cigarette to trembling.

“Yeah,” Ben says. “That.”

“At last, I can use my powers for good,” Richie says. “Do you need money? Or a criminal defense lawyer?”

“I don’t know,” Ben says, looking at the detective. “They haven’t told me yet.”

“Shit,” Richie says. “Okay, we got this. I mean, I don’t have money, but Eddie has money, you’re good for it.” He pauses. “It’s gonna be okay, man.”

“Bev,” Ben reminds him.

“She’ll be okay too.” Richie pauses. “Man, she does not look happy.”

Ben winces. “Yeah, I know.”

“I don’t know, it’s kinda hot. Not her being upset, but you punching a dude. I would watch you punch people.”

“Beep beep, Richie.”

“Yeah yeah yeah. Offer Bev a shoulder to cry on as soon as she gets out of court. I can do that. What else do you need?”

“Uh, that’s about it,” Ben replies.

“Okay,” Richie says. “Am I the only thing standing between you and a cell right now? Like, are they legally forbidden to end your one phone call before you’re ready? Because I’ve got, like, a shit ton of material I can practice on you right now, if you just need a filibuster.”

“I’m impressed you know the word filibuster.”

“Man, I watch the news, I saw that senator with her pink sneakers. I’m not a politician but I went to drama school, I can go thirteen hours.”

“Please don’t,” Ben says. “Just wait for Bev, okay?”

“Okay,” Richie says. “Okay.” He pauses. “Hey, Haystack?”

"Yeah?"

He expects another *It's gonna be okay*.

Instead Richie says, "I'd have done the same thing too, you know that?"

Ben grimaces. "Thanks, Rich."

Richie pauses and then says, "But I woulda slapped my elbow first, because *damn*."

"Goodbye, Rich."

"Love you Haystack!" Richie blurts quickly, like he's afraid Ben's about to hang up on him.

"I love you too," Ben says dryly, still looking at the detective. He hangs up.

The detective gives him a pleasant smile—especially for Chicago PD.
"All set?"

"Yeah."

The detective asks, "Uh... what does 'beep beep' mean?"

Ben blinks once. "It's an inside joke," he says.

He leads Ben to a holding cell. Ben sits on the bench and waits. Some people come in and out. No one tries to talk to him. No old writers recite poetry at him. He stares at the wall, through to the clock in the bullpen, and watches the minute and hour hands spin.

Eventually the detective comes back and says, "Mr. Hanscom, your lawyer is here."

The guy is tall and looks more stressed out than Ben feels. He is also, notably, not Amanda Johnson, which does not surprise Ben even a little bit. He kind of frantically shakes Ben's hand as soon as Ben is let into the room.

“Benjamin Hanscom? Jeff Ancona.”

“Ben,” Ben replies.

“Mandy called me and told me to ‘take care of it,’ so—” Ancona spreads his hands. “We’re taking care of it. The charges pending are going to be assault—not battery, you didn’t even leave a bruise—”

Bev said something about that to Kay—*Normally he was good, he didn’t leave bruises.* Ben abruptly wants to be sick.

Ben’s not sure what his face does, but the lawyer definitely reacts to it. “Whoa,” Ancona says.

“Sorry,” Ben says. He swallows. “You know what he’s being tried for right now, right?”

“Yep, which is why I think we can settle this pretty easily; he’s got a lot on his plate right now, and if you had to punch out your girlfriend’s husband, you could not have picked a better group of witnesses. Do you want to see photos?”

“I do not,” Ben says seriously.

“Well, it’s pretty clear he’s antagonizing you in the images. We’ve even got some early stories about it, quotes for the verbal abuse he was issuing. And it’s pretty clear you didn’t move until he was going for Ms. Marsh, there, so you’ve avoided the issue of being considered ‘still dangerous.’ So.” He folds his hands. “Bail’s been set at twenty-five hundred dollars.”

Ben blinks. He paid more than that for Mike’s truck. He paid four times that for Mike’s truck, actually.

“Okay,” he says.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Ancona asks seriously.

Slowly Ben shakes his head.

“Oh, good,” says Ancona. “So once that’s straightened out, we’re going to wait to see if he presses charges against you—and I have to

tell you, I don't think it's a smart move, but if his team tries it Mandy will just—" He grins, suddenly, his face going ecstatic. He explains a little bit about what's apparently a long-term rivalry between the district attorney's office and Tom Rogan's defense lawyer, and Ben stares at him without speaking. Then he explains that if Rogan doesn't drop the charges there might be a court appearance, and damages paid—a crease appears between his brows again as he asks if that's going to be a problem.

Does Ben like the idea of giving Tom Rogan money? No. But he also punched the man out on the courthouse steps in front of Beverly, so the things that Ben likes are immaterial at the moment.

"I'll pay," Ben says.

"Good, good," Ancona says. "This one will be pretty open and shut."

"And what about Ms. Marsh's case?"

Ancona straightens in his seat. "Hmm?"

"How is me punching out her husband going to mess with her case?" Ben asks.

Ancona seems to deflate a little bit. "I, uh, can't speak to that. You'd have to ask Mandy."

"Okay," Ben says, because it's what he expected.

After Ancona leaves, less than an hour passes before the detective comes back and says, "Mr. Hanscom, your bail's been posted."

They lead him out of the precinct and down to the window to pick up his personal items. Beverly is standing in the lobby, her left arm wrapped around her body like she's holding herself together, her right hand to her mouth as she chews on a fingernail.

"Bev," Ben says stupidly.

She looks up at him. Her gaze lands on his only momentarily before flicking over to the window. "Go get your stuff," she says, her voice thin.

Ben would honestly have preferred she hit him. She could slap him across the face and he'd kiss her palm after. This Bev he recognizes—this Bev is brittle in the way that the Bev in the parking lot of the Jade of the Orient was, very inside herself, wearing her pale suit like she can vanish in it.

He collects his phone and his wallet from the lock-up. As soon as he does he goes over to her, moving slowly and keeping space between them. "I'm sorry," he says.

She glances at his face and then away again. "Let's go," she says. There's no anger in her voice at all.

They have another hotel room. This time they're staying at the damn casino; they need the security around the door, and the hotel has been strictly instructed not to respond to any inquiries into Mr. Hanscom's reservation. Bev drives them there and Ben alternates between staring at her and looking away from her, in agony. He deserves it, but this is exactly what he was afraid of while he was waiting.

He carries her suitcase and her garment bags up without question. She checks them in and receives their keycards, and they ride up the elevator in silence.

"Bev," he manages.

The doors open and she steps out of the elevator. He follows. She opens the door to the hotel room and holds it for him to pass through. He pulls the suitcase through, hangs the garment bags on one of the doorknobs in the little hallway, and turns to her.

Her face is flushed, except directly under her eyes. *Red and white*. She closes the door slowly and reaches out for him, and he goes. Her hands are shaking as she lays them on either side of his face.

"I am so angry with you right now," she says, her voice very level; and then she bursts into tears.

Ben doesn't even think about it before he does it, he just drops to his knees. He's aware of the door behind her and how she's basically

cornered between it and the blockade of her own luggage in this little hallway, but he can't stay looming over her. Carefully he fits one hand behind her left wrist, not holding but just touching.

"I know," he says. "I know, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to do that to you."

"You—" Bev begins, and then her voice breaks. She wipes at her face with the back of one arm.

He feels like he should let her sit down, like he shouldn't leave her standing in this hallway crying, but he can't get up. Her makeup, so carefully done, is starting to fog around her eyes, and when she wipes her face it streaks.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "Did the testimony go okay? I'm sorry."

"You—the testimony went *fine*, Ben," she says. "It went *fine*, it was just the direct today, tomorrow's when they're going to ask me all the humiliating shit that happened and also how long I've been cheating on Tom and try to make me look—" Her breath hitches and she becomes inaudible for a moment, then lapses back into, "—so if the easy part went like *that* today, I don't know what the fuck's going to happen tomorrow!"

"I'm sorry," he says again. "I'm so sorry." Her hand is still on his cheek; carefully he takes it between his and kisses her knuckles, all knight-errant.

"And I don't want you there," she says.

Ben loses his breath.

It's fair.

He falls back a little.

"Okay," he says.

Bev sobs again and twists away from him. Ben gets up and takes several steps back, trying to give her space.

“I needed you,” she says.

“I know.”

“And if you can’t listen to even that, you can’t—Eddie had a panic attack on the stand and that was just one attack, and Bowers is dead, and you—” She lets out a snarl and reaches out, yanks open a door, and steps sideways into the room behind it.

Ben stands in the cramped hallway. It’s dark, with the sun gone down by now and the lights off. The ends of the garment bags rest on the floor, faintly shiny, as if it’s wet.

Bev flicks the light on in the room. Light pours through the open door and the garment bag is just a garment bag again.

Ben exhales, closes his eyes, and leans his head on the wall. It’s definitely standard plaster, not rock.

“If you don’t want me to go, I won’t go,” he says.

He hears a sink come in in the next room—so it’s a bathroom. He waits for the water to shut off before he continues speaking.

“I’ll do whatever you need me to do.” The plaster is cool on his forehead. He’s sweating. “I’ll sit there, I’ll keep my mouth shut, I won’t talk at all. No matter what anyone says.” He didn’t like hearing it, but he could compartmentalize, knowing that he just had to get Bev into the courthouse, that once she was there she was safe, that there were bailiffs there to protect her.

Bev appears in the doorway. She’s wiped her face a bit; she still looks very pale in the dark.

“You better call Bill,” she says. She sounds tired.

Ben can’t connect the pieces in his head, can’t figure out how they fit together. “Okay,” he says slowly. He would have guessed Richie, of all people. “Why?”

“I don’t have any money, Ben!” she says sharply. “I don’t—” Her hands come up and she looks down at her feet. “I don’t have access to

your accounts, I had to call Bill to get bail posted for you!"

Ben doesn't really understand what happens in his chest, right there, when she says that. Something *ker-thunk!*ing into place behind his sternum, cold and heavy like metal. Like he swallowed a silver slug.

"I'm taking a shower," she says.

"Okay," he says.

She closes the door.

Ben stands there for several long moments, in the dark, until the water hisses on in the bathroom. Then he slinks backwards out of the hallway, feeling his way in the dark until he stumbles through an archway and away from her.

Bev washes her face.

She doesn't remember how long it took her to figure out that Tom got off on her makeup running, but she got there eventually. One of those times, after the beating and then after the sex, where she got up and went into the bathroom to run a washcloth under cold water. She kilted it up between her legs, looked in the mirror, and went *oh*.

She scrubs her face with her little bottle of travel Cetaphil in the shower, and she washes her hair, and then soaps under her armpits to clean the deodorant away. The whole lower half of her body—she doesn't even want to touch. She does, because she's a grown woman and hot water is better than nothing, but that's what testifying did to her.

What would help right now? she asks herself. Her mind nudges at the perimeter of her body, trying to work out where the hurts are.

She had to call Bill twice before he picked up. It wasn't a good feeling, but Eddie's between jobs, Richie's last tour ended very abruptly, Mike is trying to get settled in Florida, and Bev can never ask Kay for anything ever again. Bill is the number-one bestselling horror writer in the world; and writers don't make a lot of money,

but his wife wears Bev's label, Bill's good for twenty-five hundred dollars.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Bill asked.

"No," Bev managed. Just the syllable felt frantic. *I need to show you something. My bathroom's full of blood. I need help cleaning it up, please.*

Bill caught her intonations fast. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No," she said. Then she swallowed. "Ben's been arrested. I can't pay bail." And she was thinking, *Bill, if you ever loved me—if you ever loved him, I know we said that we all still love each other, but please... please...*

"I got it," Bill said, like they were arguing about who was paying the tab at a restaurant. "Let me get my computer in front of me. You need a wire transfer?"

So they did it, right there on the phone in the police station, and when the woman behind the desk said, "Okay, let me notify the detective," Bev staggered away toward the wall.

"Thank you, Bill."

"Don't even worry about it, Bev," Bill said. "Are you okay?"

There was a message on her phone that said *Molly Ringwald are you there* and Bev couldn't even respond to it. She felt sick with relief and also empty. She was shaking like she had low blood sugar, and felt the kind of quavery she did when she went to work without breakfast and got sick off a latte after her morning coffee break. Nothing in her tank, no strength to build off of, and she still had to get Ben and go home.

Or—not home.

"Thank you," she repeated.

"Whatever you need," Bill said.

And the thing is she thinks he meant it. He could have said *Yeah, Ben*

can pay me back; he could have said *Don't worry I love him too*; he could have said anything. But Bev—crouching on the floor of the shower, staring down at the drain with its little salt-shaker dome of holes—is angry at him too. Because it shouldn't be whatever *Bev* needs. Did he hang up and have to explain to his wife why this strange woman needed money from him? Did he have to explain to her why he gave it without question?

She turns off the water. It takes her long moments to remember how to reach out her arm to open the shower door, step out, and fumble around for a towel.

They're folded up on the towel rack. Nice and white and clean, thick and fluffy. She sinks her hand into one, feeling the give, as she drips on the bathmat.

The mirror's fogged over. She wipes a hand across it, half afraid of finding a man's brown eyes there instead of her own green, but it's just her. She put on the waterproof eyeliner and now it's trying its best to peel away from her eyelids as requested. She puts her thumb on her upper lid and drags it away, almost rubbery, until it breaks into pieces. She runs the faucet on cold and wipes her eyes clear, piece by dark piece.

Take a shower and eat something, she tells herself. She's not sick. She's just tired. Completely burned out.

My heart burns there too.

Maybe Bev's heart is sending up flares somewhere, trying to get her attention. She's too tired to turn her eyes to the horizon.

When she comes out of the shower, towel around her breasts and hanging to mid-thigh, she finds Ben down the hallway in the living room area. He's sitting on the couch, staring blankly at a laminated page in a three-ring binder.

"Is that room service?" she asks.

He nods and hands the binder to her, wordlessly.

One hand keeping her towel up, she scans the menu. Oh god, she

could murder a grilled cheese and tomato soup right now. It's even labeled *Comforting Combo*.

"Would you order while I get dressed?" she asks.

"Of course," he says. His voice is soft.

She takes her suitcase into the master bedroom—this hotel suite is set up like a little apartment, with a kitchenette and dining area just off the kitchen, and a second bedroom at the very end of the hall—and puts on her pajamas. She then stands in front of the long mirror and rubs moisturizer onto her hands and scrubs it over her face; she's too tired to do the routine with the cotton ball at the moment.

She can hear Ben speaking on the phone. She wonders if he called Bill while she was in the shower, but she suspects not.

Okay. What to do now?

Take a shower. Eat something.

Right, yes, the physical care things. She's done those, or at least put the food in motion.

Talk to Ben.

But she's tired. And sleep is a physical need, too. Her brain feels wiped clean.

She thinks of Ben and his astronaut naps, the little alarm on his phone and how he always sat up in the car shaking his head.

Wish I could go back, she thinks, though she shouldn't be fantasizing about the bloody road trip that led her here. Instead she's thinking about their breakfast date, when she told him she wanted him to take her out and he drove her to this hipster café she'd never heard of but the eggs benny was to die for. He looked so sweet, juxtaposed against all that variegated wood, faint flush on his cheeks when she fed him off her fork.

Is he gonna look at her like that again?

Almost definitely. But she doesn't know if she wants that or if she's afraid of it. Maybe a little of both. If he doesn't, it'll mean she's lost him; but if he does, it *might* mean she's lost him, and he's hiding it.

She walks out to him. He's still on the couch, one arm stretched out over the back and his other hand pressed to his jaw. He looks up when she comes in.

"Can I have your jacket?" she asks.

He nods and then shrugs out of his suit jacket without question. Bev puts it on over her pajamas.

It feels better. Like being blanketed in him.

"I need to lie down until the food gets here," she says.

"Okay," says Ben.

They stare at each other for a long moment, until Bev realizes she's going to have to break it because he won't. She steps over his legs to fit in the space between couch and coffee table, and then curls up on the couch and puts her head in his lap. She's going to crease his suit pants. Her ear presses hard against his thigh, and she curls her knees up to keep her bare legs as warm as she can.

She closes her eyes and exhales through her nose. He feels like coming home from work and throwing herself onto the mattress, just feeling all the tension seep out of her and knowing she can *rest* now.

"Is this okay?" she asks.

"Of course," he says. After a moment he pushes his fingers through her hair. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah, it's good," she mumbles.

She drifts there for long moments. It's not quite sleep; she blinks with her eyes closed and feels herself sinking away from this space, away from this couch and this hotel room.

And then she's alone.

This little kitchen-slash-living room is impossibly modern; the wallpaper has birds on it and black paisley flocking, and the sundown blue has turned into true night in the far window. The couch is dark gray and she's alone on it, almost blending into it wearing Ben's suit jacket, and there's a man sitting at the glass-topped table set for four.

"Are you okay?" Stan asks.

She closes her eyes again. "Tired," she tells him. Then she remembers that it's Stan and that seeing Stan is something special, and she opens them again and looks up at him.

He's an adult again, but not in his cardigan. Instead he's pale and shaking and naked and bloody. His curls are wet and limp from bathwater.

"I'm sorry," he says. His cut wrists rest on the table.

"Honey," Bev says, and has no idea what to say beyond that.

"She asked me never to hurt her." Stan's voice is hitched, and his jaw works as he swallows. "And I said I wouldn't, and then I did."

"It's not your fault," she tells him. Her voice is thick and slow, and she can't quite find her tongue.

"It is," Stan says. "It is, it is, it is. None of you—I just wanted—a man's not supposed to hurt his wife. He's not supposed to. And I was just—I pushed him, I was so angry, I'm sorry, Bev, I didn't mean for you to get hurt, I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt, I didn't want her to get hurt, I'm sorry—"

She sits up on the couch and wakes herself up in doing so, gasping like she's coming from underwater.

"Whoa," Ben says, his hands coming up and away from her. "What happened? Nightmare?"

"Stan," she gasps, twisting around to look at the table.

There's no one there. Of course.

She gets up and looks at the glass-topped table. It's immaculately clean, and the only person she sees in the reflection is herself. She even runs a finger across it, looking for blood; and then she tucks her knuckles into a fist and closes her eyes and tries to fight the rising sob.

"What did you see?" Ben asks.

She shakes her head. "He's scared," she manages. "He's bleeding again. I told him it wasn't his fault, but he was talking about his wife. He bleeds when he talks about his wife."

"Okay," Ben says. He looks like he wants to get up from the couch but he isn't sure how to approach her.

There's a knock at the door.

"That'll be room service," he says. "Is it all right if I go get it?"

Bev, who still has a vague fear that Tom will be standing on the other side of the door, eye to the peephole, nods.

But it's just room service. Ben comes back with one of the hotel staff, who wheels a small cart into their dining area and smiles at Bev as though her state of dishevelment is completely unexceptional. Ben tips him and then he goes, and Ben follows him out. Bev hears him put the deadbolt in place on the door.

She reaches out and lifts one of the silver domes.

It's just tomato soup and a grilled cheese. No severed heads; no bodies unfolding from inside the fridge. No surprise deluge of blood. The soup looks orangey enough that even her brain can't trick herself; and it smells good. The chefs drew a strange geometric pattern on it in some kind of oil; she stirs it with her spoon and watches it dissolve away.

She doesn't want to eat at the table, so she carries her tray over to the coffee table and sits hunched up on the couch. Ben comes back in and looks at her, watching her moving around and giving her space. When she bites into her triangle of sandwich the cheese comes stretching away in long strings. She has to break them with her left

index finger and tuck the individual threads into her mouth. Then she sets her sandwich half down.

“I don’t want you in the court when I testify,” she says quietly.

Ben pulls out a chair—the same one that Stan had been sitting in—and sits down, but he makes no move to reach for the other tray on the cart.

“Okay,” he says. “Will Kay be enough? Mike offered to come up. And I’m sure Richie would fly out if you asked.”

She takes a deep breath—soup and grilled cheese, butter and fat.

“I’m not punishing you,” she tells him.

He shakes his head. “I didn’t think that.”

“They’re going to say disgusting things about me.” Just so he understands that she doesn’t mean the tabloids, who are already rushing to identify the mystery man Bev showed up to divorce court with, she adds, “In court tomorrow.”

Ben says nothing to that, just watches her like he thinks she might keel over suddenly and he wants to be ready to catch her.

“And if you can’t handle hearing him call me a *numb cunt* in front of a bunch of reporters, you’re not going to make it through what I have to say about my marriage,” she says. That’s just how it is. She’s exhausted already, and this was the easy part, just getting up there and talking to Amanda. She doesn’t know what Tom’s lawyers are going to ask her and she’s afraid to find out. She can’t manage herself and Ben at the same time.

Ben is quiet and then he leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees. “That’s not why I hit him.”

“I know,” she says. Her point stands. She didn’t tell him what the tape deck said and she doesn’t intend to, no matter what Stan said about honesty and telling each other the truth. She doesn’t want him to hear.

Ben's hands open and close. "I'm sorry I did that in front of you," he says. "And for what it'll do to your case. I know you don't—don't need a violent man around you, especially not right now."

Bev says, "You're not a violent man."

Why didn't you say so, Bev? I never would have hit you if I'd known. All girls are scared of spiders.

Tom never apologized to her, but her father did. Once. He was almost kind about it.

Ben doesn't say anything to her assertion, just watches, so she picks up her sandwich, dips it in her soup, and takes another bite. A drip of the tomato bisque rolls off and splashes in her open palm. She shouldn't be eating something so messy wearing Ben's nice suit jacket, but she wants it the way that she'd like to tuck up in a sweater of his. It feels like snuggling down in front of a fireplace.

She gives him as long as it takes her to chew and swallow that bite to speak, and then she sets her sandwich down. "I need you to talk to me," she says.

"I'm sorry," he says, but there's something light about it, something reflexive, almost.

"I know, you've said."

He shakes his head. "No, I mean, I'm sorry. I'm..." He sighs. "I don't know how to explain myself, because I don't... have an explanation, and if I did it's not important right now, because what's important is what you need right now."

"You always think what I need is more important," Bev says. Which is refreshing, because god knows she never got that in her marriage or before, but it's fraught in its own way. "And that's nice of you, but I don't know what's going on in your head, and I don't know—I don't know how to talk to you, if you won't meet me halfway. I just need you to meet me halfway."

Ben takes a deep breath and says, "I hate your husband."

Well, she expected that one.

“But I’m terrified that I’ve fucked over your case, or that I’ve made it that much harder for you to get your company back. I’m—” He swallows. “—worried that this is going to be the last straw and that you’re going to have do this on your own. Which I don’t want you to have to do, but if I’ve already...” He sighs and looks down at his hands. “I don’t want to make things hard for you, Bev.”

“You—” Bev wants to squeeze the bridge of her nose or something but her hands are greasy from the grilled cheese. “We can’t undo it.”

“I know,” he says.

She leans back on the couch and stares down at her bare knees.

“I hated my dad,” she says. She has dim memories of big hands tying her shoes and then lifting her up, placing her on her feet like a doll, and the way it made her laugh with her whole body, the way she couldn’t get a full breath with that pull on her arms. “And I was scared of him. But I loved him, too. And that made it worse, because it was complicated. It would have been easy just to hate him.”

She reaches out for her grilled cheese, then changes her mind and puts her hand back in her lap. Little points of grease on her fingertips, resting on her thigh.

Ben just listens.

“I don’t know what to do with uncomplicated love,” she admits. “I don’t know how to trust it. I don’t—I don’t know what to do with you, if you won’t fight with me, if you won’t get angry with me, if you just let me... I don’t know what to do if it’s not tangled up with...” She doesn’t know what to say and she feels close to tears again; she waves her hand and waits for him.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Ben says. “Not on purpose, anyway. There’s no—deep-seated resentment or anything.”

She squints at him. “Are you happy I called Bill?”

His face goes blank. Then he says, carefully, “If Bill’s who you needed

right then, then yes.”

“Bullshit,” she says. His eyebrows lift. She spits out her words like she’s throwing them at him. “I love Bill as much as I love any of us, and I hate that he kissed me when he’s married and he loves his wife, I hate that I let myself be a part of that, I hate that there’s a woman out there that he loves and who loves him and he did that to her, and he used me to hurt her, and I don’t care about his intentions or bad judgment, we have never cleared the air, and neither have you.”

“Me and Bill?”

“Or you and me,” she said. “You never said it was you—you were dying and that was going to be the last thing you said to me, reciting that poem, you let me walk around not knowing you were right there.”

“Do you want to hear that I’m jealous?” he asks, his tone tending towards incredulous.

“I want you to tell me something you feel that has nothing to do with how I feel,” she says. “I want you to be selfish.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m tired of being the selfish one!” she bursts out.

The silence settles on the modern little room like mist.

“I don’t think you’re selfish,” Ben says. “Or if you are, I think you should be. You’ve earned it.”

She looks toward the dark window. “Ben.” It comes out almost as a sob.

Ben is quiet for long moments, with his name in her voice hanging in the air, and then he asks, “Do you know what a spite house is?”

She looks around at him. There’s a flush on his face, but his eyes are a little vacant.

“No,” she says.

"It's a house that's built to annoy the neighbors," he says. "Or maintained, when all the other houses around it are getting gentrified. They're too small to live in, just to build the windows; or there's one across from the Westboro Baptist church that's painted all rainbow. They're political. You build a house, you modify your house, you refuse to sell your house. Call it a spite house. A lot of them, it turns out, belonged to black families who didn't want to give in when their white neighbors were trying to turn them out of the neighborhood. They're just houses where people are trying to live, but the rest of the world is banging on the door, is looking out the window, is complaining about the eyesore, is spitting in the gutter. Spite house. When you take up space other people wish you didn't, call that a spite house."

His fingers drum on the glass tabletop. She watches them, watches the little reflections of each fingertip.

"I think I remembered you once, before Mike called," he says. He blinks once; his mouth is twisted like he's straining to think back. "Mom lost her job two years after—we must have moved to Nebraska in, what, ninety-one?"

She can't answer that for him.

"Because she had a sister. My aunt Jean. Dead now, old bitch," he says. He looks back up at her. "Sorry."

She shakes her head. "No."

"Jean took us into her house. Which was nice of her. Or it would have been, if she ever shut up about how she took us into her house. My mother—" Ben draws in a breath and averts his eyes, swelling in place and then deflating with his exhale. "—couldn't walk ten steps without Jean reminding her how lucky we were that we had family to take us in, how lucky we were not to be on welfare. I know she said some things about my father, too, things about his family. Barely understood them at the time, but." He shrugs.

Aside from the silver dollars, Ben doesn't talk much about his father. And he told her he gave the remaining silver dollars away to Ricky Lee's children. Bev can't remember clearly—she knows Ben was

raised by a single mother, and she has a vague suspicion that Ben's father might have been military or something to have died and left him alone, but they don't talk about fathers. He's never brought up the subject, and she suspects that it's because he's afraid to get her thinking about her father, as if Alvin Marsh doesn't live in the back of her head all the time.

"She was a drunk, too," Ben says after a moment. "Pouring screwdrivers first thing in the morning, mostly vodka with a splash of orange juice. Making dinner and drinking her boxed wine." He shakes his head. "That's not why she's an old bitch, that's because drunk or sober she couldn't stand the sight of me. *Benjamin, you're a heart attack waiting to happen. Benjamin, there are children starving in Africa and you're going around like that.*" He lifts his eyebrows suddenly and gives Bev a sidelong ironic look. "And my ma couldn't say nothing, or we were out on our ears, so I just sat there and took it. But she wasn't happy when I left food on my plate, either, she was just one of those people who's never happy with what she sees." He shrugs. "Fifteen-year-old me didn't work that out. But I worked out how to piss her off. I put on ninety pounds that year. You wouldn't have recognized me."

She wouldn't have recognized him because she wouldn't have remembered him; didn't remember him, not like the way he saw her in the parking lot and asked *is there a password or something?* She just listens.

"So I put on even more weight, just to spite my aunt Jean," Ben says. "And then I lost it all to spite my track coach. I told you guys—he told me I was fat up here—" He points at either side of his temples. "And that I disgusted him. He, like, grabbed hold of—" He drops both hands to his chest and squeezes at his shirt.

The bottom drops out of Bev's stomach. You hear about teachers like that on the news. She's thinking about how shy Ben is to get his clothes off, how he had to close his eyes when she ran her hands over him in the shower, how he tries to redirect the flow of sex to her. How he got flustered and embarrassed when Richie told him he was gorgeous in the restaurant and asked *Is Stanley coming or not?*

"He said, *I see you burying the good body God gave you in a great big*

mess of fat. It's a lot of stupid self-indulgence, and it makes me want to puke." His voice drops down a little bit when he quotes the man, pushing hard on each word. It's not an entire voice, not like Richie doing an impression. It's the sound of someone who has remembered that criticism his whole life, heard it over and over in his mind. "He said, *You put what's between your ears on a diet, and you'll lose the weight. But guys like you never do.*" He lowers his hands to the table and stares down at them.

Bev's legs have gone vascular and purple with the chill. Her soup's going cold. She can't think of eating.

"And I remembered you," Ben says, his voice gone soft. "All of you. I could see you with your slingshot, and all of us in that bathroom, up on the counter and in the bathtub cheering for you. And I thought to myself—he wouldn't have lived through what I did. What we did. He didn't know *fuck* about guys like me."

"No," Bev agrees, her voice soft. "He didn't."

"He coached track," Ben says. He smiles. "And I said, *Listen to me, you stupid stone-brained son of a bitch.*" His smile widens and he tilts his head back a little and widens his eyes and gives Bev a slack-jawed, astonished look. But it's tinged with glee at the edges, how much young Ben had enjoyed saying that to the teacher who abused him. "I said, *I'm going out for the track team in March. I'm going to run down everyone you send out. I'm going to run down your best. And then you can fucking apologize to me.*"

His eyes are sparkling now. Vacant, but sparkling.

"And I did it," he said. "I lost the weight. I ran miles. First day of tryouts in March, I ran the two-twenty and the four-forty and I ran everyone else down by... lengths. It wasn't even a fair fight."

Of course he did. Of course he did. But Bev knows what happens when you get one over on the people who hurt you.

"He punched me in the face," Ben says, smiling. "And then he excused me from gym for the rest of high school."

“Jesus, Ben.”

Ben’s smile fades a little. “I’d like to be some kind of saint, for you, Bev,” he says. “But I’m spite, all the way down. I can do a lot of things, I’ll stand by you when your husband’s running his mouth if that’s what you need me to do. But I won’t stand by when someone’s trying to lay hands on you. That I will not do. Is that selfish enough for you?”

“No,” Bev replies.

He laughs then, short and without humor. “Well how about running my mouth about me and my problems, when you’re going through what you’re going through?”

“It’s better,” Bev admits. Gives her a little bit of ground to walk on.

His smile is subdued. He reaches over to the cart and lifts the other silver dome. “Do you want my soup?” he asks. “If yours has gone cold?”

“No,” she says. She gets up from the couch, licks the tomato bisque off her palm where it’s dried, and climbs up onto the chair with him. As soon as he works out what she’s doing his arms come around her and hold her in place. Her knees ache but she fits them around his hips anyway, and then she leans into his chest, her head tilted so she’s looking at the cart too.

“Did you just order what I did?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Ben replies. “Didn’t want to have to think about it. You still angry with me?”

“Maybe a little,” she replies honestly.

He kisses the top of her head. “I feel good with you, Bev. That uncomplicated love. I only want as much trust as you want to give. I love you, and it doesn’t feel tangled up in anything. I’m sorry I fucked up your case for you.”

“I don’t know that you did,” Bev says. “Amanda wants to talk to you. And Maryanne wants to talk about how we’re going to spin it.”

"Tell me where to go and I'll go," he says. His fingers scratch lightly over her scalp. "I'm sorry I did that in front of you."

"I know you are." She sits up on her knees and kisses him, putting her hands carefully on his face, hair crisp against her palms. She strokes her thumbs under his eyes when he kisses her back, not to feel for tears but to feel his cheeks apple up.

Maybe she's been a little afraid this whole time that he was a boy she knew one summer and didn't look at properly. That he could say he loved her, and she could say she loved him, but that it wasn't the kind of love you had when you were people to each other. She and Bill were kids together and she loves them all just for being her boys, but loving the memory of friends and loving a man are two different things. And she's been afraid, this whole time, that he sees the ghost of the girl and not the woman with the bruises on her wrists and the cigarette burn on her breast. That somehow she's letting the man and that girl down at the same time.

Now it feels like he's opened a door and let her in.

"Oh god, am I getting grease all over your face?" she whispers.

"Don't care," Ben says, and kisses her back.

Notes for the Chapter:

The poem quoted is "A Gradual Canticle for St. Augustine" by one Tabitha Spruce in 1969. She married two years later and now writes under her married name.

Look I wrote a couple of drafts of this chapter--one where Bev is furious and shouting mad, one where Ben dramatically monologues about his love, one where Bill calls Ben and tells him to get his head on straight. But this draft is... It's not clean, it's not solving the problem, but it felt like them. If you wanna talk about Bev's stress response or Ben's spite house analogy or anything else, I'll be in the comments.

13. Out in Chicago

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben and Bev dream. Stanley makes a confession. Bill has a conversation, but not the one he needs to. Bev wants.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this one took so long, I had to rewrite Bev's last scene because I didn't like how the first draft came out, and then I went way over target again because these people keep surprising me with sex.

Content warnings: Ben still has disordered eating, claustrophobia, fear of being buried alive, and some issues with being in the dark. Also a vague phobia of eggs, but that doesn't really get visited in this chapter much. Mentions of domestic abuse, discussion of canonical violence against women, mentions of rape BY NAME this chapter, discussion of suicide (Stan) and murder. Mention of child death. A badly transcribed stutter. Bev consents to sex after drinks. Explicit sexual content.

Ben, stumbling through his words, asks if she wants him to sleep on the couch or in the second bedroom. If she needs her space.

"God, no," Bev says.

She said that she's still angry with him—and he has to expect that until the consequences of his actions are dealt with, so that's fair—but he's relieved she's not kicking him out of bed. He doesn't necessarily like the idea of her testifying in court without him or anyone there for support—he doesn't know what Kay McCall has to say about him now, but he's so grateful that she'll be there—but if he can't be with Bev while she's doing the hardest thing he thinks he's ever watched a woman do, he wants to be with her in any way she'll allow.

And not in a fatalistic, *she's going to leave me* way. It's weird how he feels so okay, after talking about Aunt Jean and Coach Woodleigh. She wanted to hear about times he got angry, and so he told her the truth. And, as they're finishing their soup and sandwiches, she looks at him just the same. He thinks he'd die if she didn't look at him the same, but he would try to do it very quietly.

He feels like a window frame just unlocked in his chest. The little switch at the top of the pane, and then the release of pressure. Open on the outside so that stale air can circulate.

She drinks her soup when she's done with her sandwich, just holds the bowl up to her mouth and chugs it, never mind the spoon. He's so in love with her. It's been a long time since he thought, consciously, to associate food with love. He didn't think he'd ever be able to do it again.

His mother did that. That was one of the hardest parts of losing the weight. She liked being able to look across the table at him and see that he was solid, that he was taken care of, that he was *loved*, that she was doing a good job providing for him. He feels that, at times. He wants to bring his friends in from the cold; he wants to make sure that Eddie has something he can eat in spite of the hole in his face and to make sure that if Bev gets hungry at four in the morning he has a granola bar in his bag or something. But he doesn't want to cry the way his mother did when he started restricting his meals—his *stupid self-indulgence*. She sobbed in Aunt Jean's living room. She told Ben that he didn't care about everything she was doing for him.

And Aunt Jean loved that, loved being able to swoop in and comfort Arlene Hanscom and agree that teenage boys were like that sometimes, and to remind Ben that there were children starving in Africa. There were times when it was on the tip of Ben's tongue to snap back, *Well box it up and ship it to them, then*, but he didn't, because as much as it pleased Jean to rip into him and to let his mother cry on her shoulder, it also pleased her to be able to give or take shelter away. Like God himself.

Food and love and care and shelter. They're tangled up in his head. You need walls around you, but they can crush you sometimes, too.

He doesn't want Bev to feel like that.

They make out in the chair after eating, all butter and salt, and Ben tries not to get grease in her hair. There's no urgency to it. It's incredibly good, close and intimate and barely about sex at all, just Bev pressed up against him through gravity and something like hunger cycling through them, something like craving.

He stops when he feels how cold her thighs are under his palms, and he looks down to find her white skin dappled purple.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

She looks down at her own legs and makes a face. "Yeah, that just happens when I'm cold."

He has an absurd desire to offer her his pants. But he's hung out in a police station today, he needs to change his clothes.

"Do you want to go to bed?" he asks.

There's a languidness to her that he recognizes as the verge of sleep. Sometimes he watches her fight it in the evenings; sometimes she goes quiet and he doesn't realize she's drifting off until her breathing comes out in a sigh.

"Tired?" he asks. Even if she's not, he'd like to get her under a blanket or something, damn. He's thirty seconds from just wrapping her toes in his palms and trying to warm her feet.

"A little bit," she admits. "Today was a long day."

"Yeah." He rests his head on her shoulder. She didn't even give him any details about the testimony, but she had to deal not only with her stuff, but also his. He wants to apologize again, but he doesn't want her to feel obligated to forgive him, so he doesn't say anything.

He changes into pajamas and turns out the light in the master bedroom—which for no discernible reason narrows into a wedge in the corner, with an armchair, a mirror, and a floor-to-ceiling window. What was the designer thinking? They're going to sleep in a trapezoid. It's pretty early to go to bed, but Ben has his phone, and

he's also got to think about calling work tomorrow. Maybe for now he's Beverly Marsh's mystery man, but sooner or later someone's going to identify him as architect Ben Hanscom, and the partners at his firm are going to have something to say about this publicity.

Bev nods off almost immediately. It's not even nine PM, but she woke up from her doze earlier pretty freaked out. Ben stays awake, watching the movement of her eyelids and imagining he can see lavender veins in the dark, but he can't. He loves her. It's too much; he's being weird. He rolls over, puts his phone down on the nightstand, and begins mentally scripting how that phone call's going to have to go tomorrow.

He wakes up because he's being crushed to death.

There is no air in this hotel room, and he's sweating because of how warm it is in bed but his body thinks he's just overexerted, trying to fight his way out of the loose earth. He manages to glance at Bev and see that she's sleeping, undisturbed, before he remembers that the floor to ceiling window will not open.

He gets up and staggers out into the living room, past the couch and the coffee table, and over to that glass door. The balcony behind it is purely decorative, not even enough space to step out onto, but when he opens the door with a screech the wind flows into the room. He cringes, imagining Bev waking to that, but there's no sound from the bedroom. The place settings on the table in the kitchenette rattle.

Ben takes several deep breaths. The air is just above freezing, the tall buildings suck the wind off Lake Michigan and down to street level, and it's November. He's in a hotel room in Chicago with Beverly Marsh. He can see the water and a thousand red lights reflected in it.

You're going to have to do something about this, he tells himself. *The dark, and the claustrophobia, and the still air.* And also the vague sense of foreboding he gets now whenever he eats eggs. *Eggboy*.

And he will. But first he has to get back to the Bohemian Girl, instead of out in Chicago; if he's going to get a therapist he's going to need to be in his own state for that; and he's going to do his best not to interfere with Bev's case any more than he already has.

Stanley's back in the cardigan again.

He's even wearing reading glasses as he leans forward and scrutinizes bolts of fabric. When Bev comes up next to him he turns to her and says, "What do these look like to you?"

"Cloth," she says. "Why, what do you see?"

"Not sure," he replies, adjusting his glasses slightly. "They shine, though."

She touches the one he's examining. "That's interlining," she says. "You put it in collars and cuffs. It stiffens other fabric up so it sits right."

Stan's brows furrow. "Huh," he says, and then releases it.

She looks at him. There's something very meticulous about his appearance now, as an adult—something that reminds her of the precision in all of Stan's movements. He used to say odd things as a child, too, she remembers that, and then he'd laugh to himself. Not like Richie did, needing the reaction; Stan would say things and not seem to care what the rest of them thought about it.

"Stan," she says. She doesn't want to push him too hard, but she has to know. "What happened, earlier?"

Stan takes a deep breath and then removes his glasses. He tucks them into the collar of his cardigan, hanging on the placket. Bev is reminded of the blasé way he took the blood-soaked rags out of her bathroom and walked down to the Kleen Kloze laundromat, the way he smirked a little when he called it a laundry date. He's not smirking now, but the measure of his movements is still there.

"I pushed your husband," Stan says. Reluctantly, like he doesn't want to admit it, but he says it. "Just a little."

And that's... Something.

Tom is smart, is the thing. Too smart to go after her in front of

cameras, she thought. He took the buckle off the belt so that he wouldn't break skin; most of the time he didn't even leave bruises on her. Most of the time. Amanda took a photo of Bev's cigarette burns, submitted her medical records as exhibits, kept track of all the noise complaints from their neighbors. There's evidence, certainly, there's testimony, and then there's what Tom did to Kay.

Legally they can't force Bev to stay married to him. It's just proving the domestic abuse—especially after all the time between her running and her actually filing charges—that's the painful part. Surely the fact that he broke into Kay's house, beat her, and cut her face should be enough for Bev to divorce him. The tabloids were understanding about that much.

They're going to be muddled now. They'll wonder how long Bev's been cheating on her husband. They'll wonder why it took her so long to come forward.

And if they get the court records... She's afraid of what they'll have to say about the sex.

But what he did to Kay was a big misstep on his part, aside from it being the act of a fucking animal. If Bev had been aware of the charges when Kay first filed them she probably could have taken steps to lock him out of the company. There's a *Boycott Rogan&Marsh* movement online. Tom's always so concerned about optics, about how people perceive him. He wants to be in charge, in control, always smart, always right.

Was he counting on Kay staying quiet? Did he think there was going to be some way out of the fact that he entered a woman's home, beat her, made her terrified for her life, and scarred her face? Was he that far gone trying to find Beverly and kill her?

"What do you mean, you pushed him?" Bev asks.

Stan looks down at his hands and then he carefully reaches out for hers. Bev reaches back out to him and sees she's wearing the clothes she wore to the Jade of the Orient. There's a circle of bruising around her wrist where Tom grabbed her and threw her down onto the bed, just visible above her sleeve. Stan carefully wraps his hand around

her arm, just under that bracelet. His hand goes all the way around her forearm, his fingertips touching, but he just holds her arm so carefully.

This is where he cut into himself, she realizes with a dawning rush of horror that she tries to stifle.

“There are ways that the world should be,” Stan says quietly. “And it’s not like that.”

Bev thinks of the séance in Ben’s guest room, of the moment when she truly realized Richie was speaking not as himself but as someone else. It was the canny way Stan’s voice quirked up at the end when he asked *Did it work?* as though he knew the answer. Even though he couldn’t be sure of it, he was as confident as he is now, laying out the rules of the universe.

“I can see that now,” he says. “And I feel...” He jerks his head to the side, half a wobble, grimacing. “I think I can show you. Can I show you?”

“Okay,” Bev says.

Stanley lets go of her arm and reaches up and puts both hands on either side of her head. His palms rest outside her cheekbones, and it’s intimate but not in the way it is with Ben. If Stan were to kiss her it would be on the forehead, and Bev doesn’t like it when people make her look them in the eye, but it’s all right with Stan.

He leans down and touches his forehead to hers. There’s no warmth to his skin, no hardness of his skull against hers, but it’s comforting all the same. Like watching themselves perform grief and comfort in the mirror.

And then he shows her.

Bev reels. She knows this naked shock—the stinging silence while trying to process the open hand across your face, the frank incomprehension of what just happened. The way any person is confused by a sudden unstoppable attack—*why is this happening? Why is this happening? How do cause and effect work, now that this has*

happened, how do I make myself live in this reality?

And then *Do you want to get out? You want to get out of the car? By all means, Beverly.*

She doesn't hear any voices—nothing except her own breathing. Stan is not breathing, she realizes in the silence. Stan is dead, because Stan opted to get out, and instead of being left on the side of the road to call a taxi and get a ride to a friend's place, he locked himself in his bathroom while his wife was downstairs watching *The Price is Right*—and she doesn't know how she knows that, she doesn't know anything about Patricia Uris's TV habits, but she's not in her head right now.

Or she is, but she's in Stan's head too.

And what Stan shows her calls up the fear and shock and flat incomprehension of the first time Tom belted her one across the face, her not understanding why he would do that or what had just happened. She was just going about her life, it was comforting to put the cigarette in her mouth after the movie, she wasn't thinking about it anymore than she thought about shrugging into her jacket. And Stan... Stan thought he was just taking a phone call, and then he found himself in the grip of something more powerful than himself. That thudding inevitability.

And she knows this feeling. The realization that something has happened, something you didn't actually want to happen, something you thought you wanted in the moment but now you feel deep shame, now you have to live with what you are, you can't go back, you can't undo that moment, and even if you could go back in time you don't know if you would be able to respond in any other way. This is what you are now. *You can have a cigarette.* Weak. A suicide. Impotent anger.

She holds onto his shoulders, scrunching her eyes shut as the memory of water pouring down from the showerhead thrums on the back of her skull. They hold each other in this space they both see differently—and though her eyes are shut she can see fields of stars on every bolt of fabric in the racks, now, all green and blue and purple in the black nothingness, and she knows that Stan can see the velvets and

the crinkly fusibles and the striated canvases. Just something made to hold something else up—that's what they become.

Stan thinks, *He raped you* at the same time that Bev thinks, *It murdered you*.

“It wasn’t,” Bev begins slowly. It’s as hard to get out as *Three*.

“I still,” Stan says, and then stops.

She pushes forward so Stan has to straighten and she gets her arms around his waist and just holds her friend the way she wishes she’d been able to when he needed it.

“Okay,” Stan says. “Okay.” His arms wrap around her back and they sway in place.

“I still love you,” she says. “You weren’t there, but I still love you as much as any of the others—we all still love you, we miss you. I still love you.” She knows that fear in him, and she has to make him understand that this doesn’t change anything, that she doesn’t think less of him, that he’s still Stan who won at Monopoly and told her *Nice throw*. This is not the first time she’s comforted him while he cried and if it’s the last then it won’t be because Bev isn’t willing to do it anymore. One of the buttons on his cardigan is pressed into her temple; his glasses are dangerously close to her face.

The thudding of the shower becomes rounded somehow, a rhythmic cycle, and Bev opens her eyes. They’re no longer in a fabric store.

They’re in a laundromat.

The Kleen Kloze laundromat, to be exact. She can’t see into any of the whirring washing machines, all of their domes are dark, but she can hear the water.

“They say,” Stan says, and then inclines his head a little further. His chin rests on the top of her head. “They say that if you want to spill blood, you should become a butcher.”

Bev thinks of that dark and violent impulse her father left planted inside her and shivers. Stan feels it, no doubt, if he feels anything at

all.

“I think I’m becoming like It,” he says.

“No,” Bev says.

“Yes,” he says. “I think—you know how It twisted people.”

She knows—the way that her father looked at her that day, with betrayal and loathing in his eyes, and she knew that she was looking at his body but that there was something more than that in the room with them, something inhabiting him.

And she understands, at last, the unease she felt when she watched Stan speak through Richie.

“You’re not like that,” Bev says.

“I think I am now,” he says. “I might not have used to be, but... I can’t think about it too hard or I’ll start to disappear. Your husband made me angry, so I pushed him. It pushed Henry Bowers in that way, do you remember?” She remembers. “It was easier with Richie, he’s not... There’s nothing at the center of your husband, do you know?”

“I know,” Bev says.

“I probably shouldn’t be in your head like this.”

“I don’t mind.” And she doesn’t. The things he called to her attention, the things he shared with her, they were already there.

“That’s just it,” he says. “The people who wanted to look away, It made them look away, made them see nothing, made them not care. The people who wanted to hurt, It made them hurt people worse, made them kill. If you want to spill blood, you should be a butcher. I don’t want to hurt—” He shudders suddenly.

“You’re not,” Bev says. She grabs a handful of his cardigan, trying to hold him there. “You’re not, it’s okay, Stan.”

His voice is shaky when he says, “I said I wouldn’t—” And then he

blinks right out of her hands.

Bev is standing in the fabric store again. All of the cloth in the aisle is soaking wet, though whether it's been washed or whether it's dripping bathwater, she can't tell.

Ben has three phone calls.

He's got some time on his hands. Bev has made it clear that she would prefer to handle the actual court testimony on her own, and Ben is going to respect that, so he has the hotel room to himself for most of the day. Every morning he walks Bev down to the hotel lobby to meet the other Ben on her legal team, Ben Cross, and then Cross smuggles her into the courthouse through the back entrance.

Meanwhile Ben goes a little bit nuts with his CAD software. He has to do something to stop himself from looking at the tabloids, because they have not been kind, and Bev specifically asked him not to read coverage relating to her court documents. So Ben happens to see a picture of William Morris's "Trellis" wallpaper and has half a house designed by the time that Jeff Ancona calls him.

Ben's very aware that beggars can't be choosers, and that he's very lucky to have received legal assistance instead of being made to spend the night in a holding cell for assault. He's also very lucky to be in a financial position where he can take it for granted that he'll be able to pay for his own legal services. When he asked Ancona what his rates were, Ancona just looked at him, perplexed, and explained that he's from the legal aid office. He's just a friend of a friend of Amanda Johnson's (and admires her significantly, and seems to be able to get away with calling her Mandy), and he happened to be available at very short notice.

So Ben will be donating substantially to the DuPage County legal aid office.

When Ben picks up, Ancona tells him, "I have good news and bad news. Oakley—" This being Tom Rogan's lawyer. "—is offering to drop the charges against you."

Because any mention of Bev's husband is bad news, Ben has no idea whether this is supposed to be the good or the bad. "And?" he asks.

"In exchange for Beverly agreeing to a no-fault divorce settlement."

It's not funny.

Ben laughs so long and hard that his laptop falls off the bed.

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid you were going to say," Ancona says.

"Absolutely not," Ben says. Does Rogan expect him to pitch that to Beverly? Does he really think that just because *he* was incapable of putting Beverly first, Ben's stupid enough to do the same? Ben doesn't even want to tell Bev that Rogan's legal team floated that offer, because he's *incredibly* afraid that she'll take it. And they might have talked about taking care of each other, but there is *no way* Ben's twenty-five-hundred-dollar assault fine even comes close to the value of Bev's entire company.

He's going to have to explain that to his company later, too. At some point someone's going to identify Ben's face from the *many* photos of him punching out Tom Rogan, and there will be press coverage about the hermit architect that's really not in his firm's PR strategy. When he went independent he formed it as a private practice, so at least the partners aren't implicated as part of Ben's financial assets.

"Okay," Jeff Ancona says. "I'm going to tell Mandy you said that. But she's going to have to talk to Ms. Marsh about the offer too."

"As long as it's on the record that my official response is *fuck that*," Ben says.

He suspects that his architecture firm is going to be less enthusiastic about that being the official response. He doubts it'll make it into a press release, for example.

After Ancona hangs up, Ben calls his assistant Joey.

"Hey, Joe," he says.

"Mr. Hanscom," Joey says, as though they've had this call on the

schedule for weeks and he's been anticipating it. "How are you?"

"Well, you know how I've been on sabbatical for a little bit?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," Joey says.

Ben is extremely lucky that Juniper Hill, after Henry Bowers's very bloody escape from their facility, seemed far more concerned with the government funding they get from holding offenders declared not guilty by reason of insanity than they were with the murders of their staff and inmates. Their lawyer came in with the argument that the bad press surrounding the trial would unfairly influence sentencing in Maine, especially if judges were more reluctant to provide mentally ill offenders with the treatment they need. As a result, people now need court orders to look at *Penobscot County v. Richard Tozier*, so both Ben's and Bev's involvement in the case is officially under seal. (Richie has taken this in stride, claiming that he can't disclose certain information like his height, his weight, and his age for legal reasons.)

Mike was concerned that they might not all be able to enjoy the same level of success they had, now that It's dead. Ben is of the opinion that, no matter whether the clown was alive or dead, no cosmic intervention could suppress the current press coverage. CNN has already published an article called *The Timeline of the Tom Rogan-Beverly Marsh Divorce*. It's a level of scrutiny that the rash of child murders in Derry, Maine, never got. Ben tries not to be bitter about it.

"Well, I have every reason to expect that, if I'm not in the news right now, I'm going to be soon. And I imagine the partners are going to want an explanation for that, and maybe we'll have to put out a press release."

"All right," Joey says. They have PR people for that. Ben just wants to design buildings, he's not interested in managing his own image, and his PR team eventually decided that *hermit architect* was a good and enigmatic angle.

Kind of the polar opposite of punching out the CEO of a fashion label, actually.

Joey says that he'll consult the partners' schedules and invite them to a Skype meeting. The invitation will arrive in Ben's email. He's not concerned—as long as it happens when he's by himself. When Bev comes back from court, he wants to be able to dedicate his attention to her.

After he hangs up on Joey he has several long minutes of staring at his phone, checking the clock. It's before noon—can't be too late where Bill is. Time for Ben to get it together and call one of his dearest friends.

Bill picks up quickly. "Hello?"

"Hey," Ben says. "Is now an okay time?"

"Fine," Bill replies. "Audra's on a long shoot, I'm in the house by myself going stir-crazy."

"Have you started hallucinating yet?" Ben asks, only half-serious.

"Yes," Bill replies.

Ben blinks. "Really?"

"Sometimes," Bill replies. "I will be honest, I don't know what's real anymore, and it's coming out in my writing."

Ben wipes a hand over his face. "You don't know what's real in the sense that our lives are too goddamn unreal for us to function, or you don't know what's real in the sense that you don't know who I am, who your wife is, the usual?"

"The first one," Bill says. "If that changes, I'll let you know."

"Okay," Ben says, because he thinks that's the best he can ask for. Bill is as serious and matter-of-fact about the whole thing as usual. He'd like to think, after all this time, that he knows what a call for help from Bill Denbrough sounds like, but he's not sure he remembers. "I hear I owe you some money."

"Little bit," Bill says. "Fortunately for you, there's an ocean between us, so I can't come back and kneecap you for running late."

Ben laughs. “I’m in Chicago, too, so there are great lakes between us as well.”

“Extra safe. Novelists can’t cross moving water, haven’t you heard that?”

“Do I have to invite you in?”

“No, now you’re indebted to me I’m going to ask you for a favor one day,” Bill says. “I’m kidding—do you want to take care of that now or later?”

“Let’s do it now,” Ben says, because he’s got his computer in front of him. “Were there fees?”

He goes into his bank account and transfers the money, and the additional fees it cost Bill to send money from London to Chicago in the middle of the night instead of waiting one to three business days, back to Bill’s account. Ben does all right for himself—he’s not traveling by private jet every week or anything—but that old part of his brain that made him nervous about what things cost (sweatshirts, watches, his mother’s Walkman) wakes up and side-eyes him in a way it hasn’t in years. Not for the twenty-five-hundred dollars, but for all the legal fees.

Business settled, Ben folds his computer and gets up, goes over to the chair in the corner, and sits. He tilts his head all the way back, holding the phone to his shoulder with his ear.

“How is she?” Bill asks.

Ben sighs. “If I tell you she’s not happy, will you come out here and beat me up?”

“Nah, I’ll tell Mike and he’ll steal her away to Orlando in the middle of the night. Come on, you’re a lot bigger than me, I’m going to delegate.”

Ben rubs his hand over his forehead. “How’d she sound when she called you?”

Bill pauses and then says, “Like a ch-ch-ch.” There’s a soft huff. “Like

she used to.”

“A child,” Ben says. He did that. He frightened her badly enough that she went back to that old hunted mindset.

Is the self-flagellation helpful, Hanscom? Or is it a bunch of stupid self-indulgence?

“I didn’t read the papers,” Bill says. “Did he deserve it?”

“Yes,” Ben says. Tom Rogan would deserve it if Ben killed him. But Bev wouldn’t deserve what that would do to her. “I didn’t want her to see me do it, though.”

“I still think you’re the best thing for her right now,” Bill says, surprisingly sincere.

Ben blinks a little.

Against that silence, Bill says, “I’m serious. Look, I wanted...” He sounds exhausted, all of a sudden. “I wanted you and me to be okay, after the Townhouse.”

“We are okay,” Ben says.

“Listen,” Bill says. “You mean as much to me as any of them. But you were meant to walk away with her. I’m sure of it.”

“I don’t—I can’t take her for granted, Bill,” Ben says.

“I know. That’s not—” Bill sighs again, and then laughs a little. “I’m fucking this up.” He clears his throat and then tries again. “I’m married, Ben.”

“I know,” Ben says.

“I love my wife.”

“Good.”

“I had to tell her.”

Ben says nothing in response to this. He’s thinking about that strange

man from the police station, asking, *Is his wife going to leave him or something?*

“How long have you been together?” he asks at last.

“Since I was twenty-three,” Bill replies.

“Jesus.”

“I know. God, I was such a kid.”

The irony of this statement is so thick that Ben is sure nothing he can say will cut through it.

“Look, I talked to Richie,” Bill says. “And we both found that, as soon as we walked back into Derry... we lost a little bit of ourselves. Some of that m-m-maturity we fought for over the years.”

The obvious joke about Richie’s maturity is right there, but Ben doesn’t go after it.

“I felt like I was th—irteen years old again.” He audibly gets stuck and pushes through it. “And nobody had looked at me suh-since last Ssseptember. My uh—parents, my wife, my director. I just stopped. And Bev was fffffamiliar, and we were all suh-scared, and.” He sighs. “I’ve talked this over with my wife and my therapist, I swear.”

“You don’t have to explain this to me,” Ben says.

“No, listen,” Bill says. “You weren’t like that.”

“Like what?” Ben asks, because he was definitely scared.

“You s-stayed a man,” Bill says.

Still just a fatboy.

“I don’t...” Ben demurs, not sure what that’s supposed to mean.

“I was off the rails,” Bill says. “I couldn’t thuh-think about anything that wasn’t G-G-Georgie, and I fell for the same tricks I fell for when I was a kid, and I—” He falls abruptly silent and the crackle of his

breath comes over the line.

Bill told them about the kid who died at the carnival. The bicycle, certainly, and the skateboard, but also the kid. Not in graphic detail. But Ben knows it was bad.

“And you were the goddamn adult in the room,” Bill says. “You and Mike, maybe, since I don’t think Mike ever... You... You tried to get everyone to stay, you, uh, patched up Mike after he got s-tabbed, you helped Eddie, you fought the s-spider, you helped me get Richie out of that *fucking* well. I made every mistake, Ben, and I think that’s why I m-missed when I tried to fuh-fuh-fight It in the Ritual again.”

“Bill,” Ben says.

“Listen. You m-might’ve been the new kid when we were th-thirteen years old. But I don’t th-think the heart of you has changed. You always had the steady hands, you always knew the way that things were going to—*fuck!*—fit together. I owe you my fucking life, okay? I don’t think we would have gotten out without you.”

“I didn’t,” Ben begins, and then gives up. “Bill, I never blamed you for being the one everyone liked best.”

“That’s not.” Bill falls silent and makes a strange noise in his throat, either frustration or the stutter. When he speaks again, his words are slower. “I’ve been married to Audra for going on fourteen years. I’m still working out how to spend the rest of my life with her, knowing I can never tell her what happened and that even if I did, she wouldn’t understand.”

Ben doesn’t know what to say to that.

“Sorry, maybe I’m, uh, projecting,” he says. “And I’ll talk to Beverly if she’ll let me. I’ve just been thinking—there are, uh, people who make their homes in your heart.”

It sounds like a quote. Ben’s talking to a writer, but he narrows his eyes and squints at himself in the mirror across from the armchair. Nice sentiment. Ben’s not sure what to do with it, but it resonates somewhere.

"And you're one of them. All of you are. And if there's anyone I trust to take care of them all, not just Bev—because I have to give Audra everything I have if I want to keep her—I'm glad it's you. I can't think of anyone better."

Ben blinks once. "Mike?" he suggests.

Bill laughs. "No, Mike's won his time off."

"So you need me to build a lighthouse."

"Yeah, maybe," Bill says. "When you need me, man, I'll always be there. Money, time, fuh-phone call, anything."

"As long as your wife's not in an active emergency."

"Yeah, if you could, uh, pick your crises around her shooting schedule that'd be great, she's about to go into, uh, production and I have been missing her."

Ben laughs a little. When he sobers he says, "You were always the leader."

"I mean, I never asked for that either," Bill says. "And we're not going into danger anymore, are we? What do you need me to lead you into?"

"I don't know," Ben says. "Bev's been dreaming about Stan, and she says something's coming for Mike."

"Don't worry about Mike," Bill says. "He's happier than I've ever seen him, it's wild."

"Florida?"

"He—uh, actually, it's too weird to explain. Let's just say he's tapped a new well of research and he's fucking thrilled. Have you talked to him recently?"

"Mostly about Bev," Ben replies.

"Yeah, he said she asked him not to read any of the coverage. I

decided to follow his lead, but I don't have Google alerts set up for all our names still, and he does."

"I don't know what the fuck's going to happen from here on out," Ben says. "Maybe that's what we need you to lead us into."

As far as Ben knows, Bill has enough credit as the number-one bestselling horror writer in the world that he could, in theory, publish more books based on his reputation alone. Ben isn't sure how fighting for contracts is going to go over now that It's dead and he's made the news in a bad way.

"I think you're doing fine," Bill says. "Matter of fact, I think you're doing too fine. Would it kill you to call me with your own p-problems every now and then?"

"You like to feel involved?"

"Yeah, I like to feel involved, I'm, uh, procrastinating writing a novel."

Absently Ben wonders what Bill's home looks like, beyond the blurry study he sometimes sees. He wonders if he'll ever get to find out.

"Next time I get work for the BBC," Ben says.

"Next time they need a matching radio tower?"

"I don't know if I'd want that or not," he admits, thinking about it. The reception to the first one has been so polarized; and Ben kind of feels he's put the finishing touches on that design, he isn't looking to make a companion or mirror it. "The matching tower, I mean, not to come visit you. I'd come visit you."

"Bummed I'm gonna miss Richie's birthday."

"We'll Skype you in," Ben says.

"Are you going to judge their new apartment?"

"Not out loud, but definitely on the inside," Ben says, not meaning it. He's still thinking about the house with three guest rooms. He's not

particular on whether one's for Bill or for Bill and Audra, but he does want his friend to be happy. "I hope it works out, man."

"Richie and Eddie?"

"No, we're still not talking about that," Ben says, as though it hasn't been *thirty fucking years*. "I mean you. Whatever you want to do."

"Yeah, me too," Bill says. "You though... I have no doubts."

Ben smiles a little. Part of him wants to say *That makes one of us*, but it's never a bad thing to have Big Bill in your corner.

Bev's case is in a difficult place.

In the end the domestic abuse comes down to almost a non-issue, which is baffling considering it's all Bev has thought about for a good six years of her life. Tom's lawyer keeps getting up—and this guy moves like he's oiled, like he's one of those Disney World animatronics on an old track—and explains that no one can really know what happened between Tom and Beverly, that this is a classic *he said she said*.

Amanda Johnson gets up and asks the jury about the inherent trustworthiness of a man who breaks into a woman's home claiming to be a flower deliverer and then slashes her face with a piece of her own vase.

Edward Oakley, Tom's lawyer, gets up and argues that the incident between Kay and Tom has no bearing on this case, because the one pressing charges here is not Kay McCall but Beverly Rogan.

"I am pressing charges," Kay says helpfully. "And he asked me where Bev went, so I'm pretty sure it has something to do with her."

The judge politely asks Kay to respond only to questions posed by counsel, and has that comment stricken from the record. But Bev loves her for it anyway.

Bev appreciates Amanda Johnson and her unchanging stone face. In

or out of court, she has never suggested that Bev made even one mistake—whether it was leaving Tom without pressing charges immediately, or whether it was hitting him back in the violent altercation before she went to Maine (which Tom’s lawyer is trying to spin as *wrongdoing on both sides*), or whether it was addressing him on the steps of the courthouse. Bev doesn’t know whether Amanda just isn’t the reprimanding type or if she’s seen a lot of women whose husbands hit them.

Bev doesn’t want to think she’s fragile. She and Tom sit on opposite sides of the courtroom with their lawyers between them, and Bev tries not to look at him. She does look at him, of course, but she doesn’t let him catch her at it.

There are a number of reasons Bev could want to file for divorce from her husband. It would be enough that she’s moved on emotionally (as if that could be the most accurate way to describe what she feels) to Ben. It would be enough to hear that Tom attacked a beloved friend (Kay was her maid of honor at that damn courthouse wedding). Even from a business perspective, it’s natural for a business partner to want to distance themselves from someone who has such heinous charges against them.

The label was created jointly, during their marriage. It’s part of their shared assets. And when everyone’s made mistakes, Oakley asks, how can the judge unilaterally decide to award all valuable assets and immediate guaranteed income to one party?

The judge looks just as unimpressed at this as he did when Kay piped up. “The judge will decide what the judge decides,” he says. “Ms. Johnson?”

Amanda, face unchanging and voice as steady as it ever is, redirects Kay and gets testimony about her suspicions that Tom was abusive to Bev. Gets testimony about witnessing Tom lunge for Bev outside the courthouse. Gets testimony that Bev regularly shows Kay preliminary designs before they’re refined and made into Rogan&Marsh’s collections, and that if Tom has any input on the creative process, Kay never sees it.

Oakley interrogates Kay about her own ex-husband. He asks why

they divorced. He asks about Kay's feelings about men in general.

"I just think they're a little too emotional for the business world," Kay says dryly.

"Ms. McCall," the judge says. He denies Oakley's request to treat Kay as a hostile witness.

Then she calls up designers and assistant designers who work at Rogan&Marsh—or did. A lot of them are jumping ship now. Every time one of her employees comes up, Bev silently wants to cry. How is she going to work with these people who now know exactly how bad things got in her marriage? Even if she gets the company back, how is she ever going to look any of them in the eye ever again?

Kay takes her out for drinks at the end of court that day. Bev wears her big sunglasses, for once not because she's hiding a black eye or a bruised cheek, but because she's trying to pass unnoticed. She wraps a scarf over her hair too and belts her trench coat all the way up like a flasher.

Kay makes no effort to hide the laceration across her cheek. She brings James the bodyguard. He spends the interaction sitting in a chair off to the side, just watching the door, and Kay carries on like he's not even there. If James minds this, he doesn't let on.

"You remember when I was working at Delia's," Bev says.

"Oh yeah," Kay agrees.

Part of the appeal of dating Tom was that he was in the business. He looked over her sketches and his eyebrows rose in what she knows was genuine appreciation. For an assistant designer at a label quickly passing out of vogue, it was nice to have someone tell her that she was phenomenal at what she did. And he was so conveniently there, he understood the culture, he understood the hours—as long as *she remembered to call when she was working late*, it turned out later. For a long time it seemed only natural to team up with him.

"Do you think he'd have married me if I were a shit designer?" Bev asks.

Kay gives her a bland look. “I mean, do you want me to say that I think your husband was scheming to make money off you all along? Because I do, but—” She draws an invisible line just over her scar. “—I’m a little biased.”

Bev doesn’t know what she’s looking for, in asking Kay that, so she abandons that line of questioning.

“Listen,” Kay says, because Kay has never needed more than one prompting to speak her mind. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty. I know it’s a cliché, but everyone says it because it’s fucking true. I wish I’d never opened the goddamn door—who the fuck delivers flowers to me?” She shrugs, then rapidly stirs her Manhattan with her cocktail straw. “I wish I’d grabbed you at your wedding and spirited you away. I knew you were good.” She shrugs. “I lost my passion for that, or I’d have invited you on with me.”

“Would you?” Bev asks, a little surprised.

Kay shrugs. “I mean, I like to think so now. But you are a *smashing success, darling*.” She drawls this last out and then sips her drink through the little straw. “And hindsight’s twenty-twenty. I’ll always bet on you, for what it’s worth, because I know what you’re made of, and I know what you’ve lived through.”

You don’t know the half of it, Bev thinks.

“Why’d you quit design?” she asks.

Kay shrugs. “I stopped loving it. Started resenting the people looking at me. I know everyone gave Britney Spears endless shit when she shaved her head, but like... once I found out the story, I really got it. *Don’t touch my hair*. I got tired of being consumed.”

Bev thinks about her name on the label. About the phrase *Who are you wearing?* About the way that *How do you look?* is not a question to be answered *With my eyes* or *With the mind*, it’s something passive (*how are you perceived?*) made into the active voice. As if the way people look at you is your responsibility.

“How do you feel now?” she asks Kay.

Kay gives her a dead-eyed stare. “People are going to look at me for the rest of my life now.” She smiles abruptly. The straight line across her cheek, the slash, curves when she does that. The skin is tight there, and there’s faint stippling above and below the scar where her stitches were. “But it’s different, now. They’re not going *Oh she’s fuckable* or *How dare she go out in public without a smile on her face?*” Bev, who has gotten that too, lifts her eyebrows in mute acknowledgement. “Kinda makes me feel like a big ol’ fuck you.” She laughs suddenly. “*Come and have a look at the violence inherent in the system!*”

Bev manages a weak smile and looks down at the ice in her screwdriver.

“I don’t know,” Kay says. “I have a lot of mixed feelings. I’m unpacking them with my therapist. I can tell you, before I went into Women’s and Gender Studies, I would have been fuck-all able to cope with this. Now.” She tilts her head from side to side. “I’m not gonna say I’m doing a great job, I’m leaning a lot into my anger so I don’t have to think about my *fear*, but I don’t know if I could have handled a beauty treatment like this when I was in my thirties, in my forties. Not that you’re a baby, you’re obviously... You know what I mean.”

What would Bev have done, at thirteen years old, if Henry Bowers had cut her across the face?

What would she have done if her father had cut her?

“I’m so tired,” she tells Kay, and it comes out so thick that she startles herself. She’s almost on the verge of tears, and she didn’t realize it until just now. “I wake up every day and I think *I have to fight him*. And my friends say *You’re so brave! You’re so tough!* And—I want to be brave, and I want to be tough.”

Kay nods, her eyes a little wide but focused. Part of James’s job is, apparently, to drive her around, so she doesn’t have to worry about her drinking. Bev feels she ought to keep a better eye on Kay’s intake, see how much this is becoming a thing in the wake of the attack, but she’s just not around Kay enough in social scenarios these days. It’s all formalwear and court-appropriate makeup.

Kay never wears makeup across her scar.

“I want to be brave, I want to be tough, I want to be the undefeatable Beverly Marsh,” she says.

“Is that what all your childhood friends called you?” Kay asks.

Bev smiles a little. “No, but I wish. My childhood friends say I’m a good guy.”

“You are a good guy!” Kay says.

Bev smiles. “I just—I wish I didn’t have to be brave or tough. I wish I didn’t have to *fight*. I’m so tired of the fighting, you know?”

“Of the language of violence?” Kay asks. “Yeah, that’s a real thing.”

The language of violence.

“Yes,” Bev says, hearing the amazement in her own voice. “Yes, it’s like—it never belonged to me, it’s something that happened to me, and I can’t get away from it. Like it—” She closes her eyes. “I feel like the first time anyone hit me—” She means her dad, but she’s talking around it, because that’s a trauma she doesn’t particularly want to dredge up in front of Kay, because Kay will be aware of how people accustomed to trauma repeat patterns and Bev’s not ready to admit to that kind of *culpability*. “—like something *took root* there. Like before I knew that was something a person could do to another person...” She gestures with open hands.

Kay watches, her hazel eyes very steady and focused.

“I feel like ever since then, there’s been something bad in me. Some kind of other Beverly that thinks, *Well, if it comes down to it, you can resort to this*, and kind of *hopes* for it. I—you know what I did to Tom to get out, and I—he was bleeding everywhere. He was bleeding everywhere, because I cut him and ripped him up and I beat him, and I just thought *God, he’s disgusting*. And then I was downstairs and he shouted for me, and I thought... I just thought I had so much more time than I did. I felt like I had hit him so much harder than I had. But I just think there’s this *mean streak in me*—”

She remembers James the bodyguard and freezes.

"James has signed a non-disclosure agreement and he cannot be compelled to testify about anything related to my case," Kay says immediately.

Moving for the first time in a good forty minutes, James's eyes half-shutter and he lifts his head and looks around. "Did you say something, ma'am?" he asks, a smile curled up in the corner of his mouth.

"No, James."

Bev takes a deep breath and sighs it out through her nose, then drinks from her screwdriver again. The vodka goes blunt over her tongue; the orange trails after it, sharp. Booze still makes her feel weak in the arms and vaguely hot at her core. She swallows.

"I want to be done with violence," Bev says. "I've had enough now, and I want to be done."

"Me too," Kay says. She blinks slowly. "It's not fair, is it?"

"It's never been fair," she says.

Now that they're less concerned about Tom actively hunting Bev down or trying to go through Kay to find her—Tom knows where Bev is, knows that she will appear in court every day—James the bodyguard drops Bev off at the hotel. This is an elaborate process, because Kay doesn't want to leave Bev by herself when she walks from the car into the hotel lobby, and James can't in good conscience leave Kay in the car to walk Bev into the lobby himself, and Bev feels incredibly awkward about having all three of them get out of the car and walk her fifteen yards into the hotel lobby.

Eventually Bev gives up and texts Ben to meet her downstairs, and James waits, staring blandly at the hotel employees, until Ben comes through the doors. Logically she knows that Ben is one man, of a height with Tom and weighing significantly less, and there's no reason an architect should make her feel as safe as a bodyguard. Illogically...

Illogically, there's something magical about being with Ben. And these days, she's pretty qualified to judge what is and is not magic; since last September (*since you were thirteen years old and heard a little voice coming out of the bathroom sink*) she's gained enough practical knowledge she could testify as an expert witness on magic, if the judge allowed it. Bev knows that pull, the feeling that all seven of them need to be together, the feeling that she needs to be a part of something.

Sometimes, when she's being particularly self-indulgent, she thinks *Ben is the opposite of It*. Which is an absurd thought to have; obviously Ben is nothing like It. But it's rooted in the way (*the way he made me feel*) being with him feels. All light and air and warmth. Secure. Confident. Everything she wanted to draw to herself when she was in the sewers and scared.

As she gets out of the back of Kay's car, her heels in her hand because her feet hurt after all day wearing them, Ben reaches out apparently automatically and takes hold of her other arm to steady her.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

She nods. "I'm a little drunk," she admits.

"You better take care of her, cowboy," Kay says from the passenger seat. If Bev is drunk, Kay is the mayor of drunk town.

"Yes, ma'am," Ben tells her. He helps Bev climb up out of the car so that she steps onto the pavement and not on the road. "Your bag?" Bev turns back around to lean down and grab it, but Ben says, "I got it, hang on."

"I'm not that drunk," Bev says, but he's already leaning down and picking her purse up out of the backseat. Bev puts her shoes in it so that the heels stick out of the top and slides it all the way up to her shoulder.

"Good night, Kay," Ben says.

"*Goodnight, you moonlight ladies,*" Kay replies, half-singing. "*Rockabye Sweet Baby James.*"

“Ma’am, please don’t call me that,” James says seriously.

Bev is still laughing when Ben closes the car door.

Kay rolls her window down and says, “Hey, hey, hey,” until Bev leans down and lets Kay kiss her on the cheek. “I love you, girl.”

“Love you too, Kay.”

“You’re gonna live through this,” Kay says.

Through the thick darkness of her sunglasses, Bev sees the seriousness on her face.

“I know,” she says. “You will too.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Kay says.

“Good night.”

Bev and Ben walk into the lobby. No one approaches them. They show their keycards to the security guard by the elevators and get in one without issue. Bev wonders if pantyhose will actually do anything in shielding her from athlete’s foot, and then takes off her sunglasses and puts them in her purse with her shoes.

“What did you do today?” she asks Ben.

He’s wearing jeans and the layered shirts that she’s realized are his comfortable clothes. He wore them to travel in. He doesn’t like to think much about the clothes he puts on his body, but he knows how to look presentable for a business meeting. He just finds something he likes and sticks with it in three or four variations; it’s something like Ben’s uniform. In this hotel elevator it seems like a silly number of shirts. Excessive.

Bev looks down and begins unbuckling and unbelting her trench coat.

“Approved press releases,” Ben replies, a slight grimace on his mouth.
“Good night out?”

“Yeah,” Bev says. “I didn’t want it to be so serious, but.” She shrugs.

She can't remember the last time she and Kay hung out just for fun. It was long before Derry. With the kind of recluse Bev was turning into (*Tom was making you into*), she's lucky that Kay still feels the loyalty she does.

"How long was she singing James Taylor?"

"I think that was just for you," Bev replies.

Ben smiles.

"I'm not very drunk," she tells him. "You've seen me drink more than this. I'm just... tired. Makes it worse." She pulls the scarf out of her hair and finger-combs it.

"You look very Parisian," he tells her.

Bev is aware that her hair is crushed flat to her head. Her scalp is a little sore right at the part. "Right now?" she asks.

"More so when you got out of the car," he says. "I felt like I was greeting a movie star."

Bev laughs and does not think about Bill's wife. She and Tom saw that movie—something about *The Demon from the Pit*, because *The Black Rapids* was deemed too dull a title for Hollywood—and she thinks Tom commented on how much the actress looked like her.

"I'm really mad," she says, her voice calm.

Ben, whose expression had been warm and fond, raises his eyebrows. Not in a condescending or shocked way, but she can tell he's getting ready to pivot based on her emotional cues.

She doesn't want him to.

"Not at you," she says. "Just—we should be at your house in bed right now, doing nothing. In a just world, we would be having marathon sex right now."

The elevator slows as they approach their floor. Ben is blushing.

"I don't know if you've worked this out by now, but I'm kind of a slutty drunk," she admits.

Ben winces, still blushing. "That's not the word I would have used."

She winds her scarf around her hand. "But you noticed?" she challenges him.

"Bev, I'm not sure if you noticed this, but you could snap your fingers and have me just about any which way you want, I'm not the guy to talk to about *slutty*."

He says it so calmly and matter-of-factly that Bev is still staring at him when the elevator doors open. Something about testifying every day about her abusive marriage has kind of killed her sex drive, and she suspects Ben's been too anxious about that to initiate anything.

He holds his hand in the elevator doors to stop them from closing and gestures *after you* at her.

She walks backwards out of the elevator. "Yes," she says.

"Yes what?" He's not teasing, he seems genuinely not clear on what she's talking about.

If Bev were a little drunker she might say *Yes I want to have sex* in this hotel hallway. Instead she keeps walking toward their hotel room. She holds up her right hand, the scarf untangled from it, and snaps her fingers.

She can tell it clicks when Ben groans, "*Jesus*."

Despite the joke (half serious) Bev still feels a little nervous every time she walks into the hotel room. It feels like Tom will be sitting there, waiting for her. Ben was just here, he was here all day as far as she knows, but the feeling that he could be lurking behind any door, ready to finish the job, lives in her. When they get in she turns on all the lights as she walks down the hallway, looking into each of the rooms and satisfying herself that they're empty. She throws her trench and her blazer on the couch.

Far from in the mood, Ben is looking warily at her. "Okay, but how

many drinks did you have?”

“Like two screwdrivers,” Bev replies. “I meant it, you’ve seen me drink more.”

“I’ve seen you drink, I’ve never really seen you intoxicated,” he says.

“I’m not intoxicated. We got fries at the bar. It was weird, they called them Irish nachos and served them with pickled jalapeños and sour cream.”

Ben frowns. “Wait, was the weird part the fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes a nacho, or was it the pickled jalapeños?”

“The first one, the jalapeños were actually pretty good.”

“I will take your word for it.”

She comes over to him and puts her hands on his hips, her thumbs just resting above the waistband of his jeans. “You can say no,” she tells him. There’s a swooping sensation in her gut at the idea, like she’s falling and waiting for him to catch her. She can handle a lot of things, but she doesn’t know what she would do if she woke up and Ben Hanscom didn’t want her anymore.

Part of what she’s mad about is the feeling that they could have been doing this the whole time. That if she’d been a normal girl with a normal teen crush and been able to stay in Derry without—everything that happened, the terror that was 1989—maybe she’d have turned around and realized that Ben Hanscom was always looking at her. Not the way she was used to being looked at. Not the nervous way all the boys looked at her when she stepped out of her dress and leapt into the water in her white bra and underwear, then eager to show that they weren’t looking; and she closed her eyes and sunbathed and knew they were more embarrassed to look at her than she was to be looked at, and it was good to reverse that for once, to make the people who looked at her nervous.

Sometimes Ben looks at her with his heart so open and tender that she doesn’t know what to do with it. That’s what reminded her of

him—when he said *Is there a password or something?* and she recognized him. Ben looked different, but he never looked at her differently.

He leans down and kisses her gently on the mouth. “Can I say yes, but nothing we haven’t done before?”

“Yeah, it’s late, I don’t have the kind of energy it takes to be that creative,” Bev replies, and he laughs. She loves it when he laughs out loud; it feels like winning it from him, somehow.

They kiss and she gets her hands up under one of his three shirts, running up his back, and he’s kissing down her neck when she scratches down his spine, just lightly, just to feel him arch into her against the counter.

“You’re sweet,” she says.

“You’ve said that before.” She loves how low his voice gets.

“Well, you’re still sweet.”

She misses the life she could have had. That’s the thing she’s mad about—the way she had good things within reach and the way that any number of things she couldn’t control took them away. Ben unbuttons her blouse and lifts up the cup of her bra to kiss under her breast the way he likes to, and she presses her nose to the crown of his head and smells his hair, the scent of bone-deep comfort. She seethes on the inside; sex could always have been like this, it didn’t have to hurt, it didn’t have to be humiliating, it didn’t have to make her feel out of control, it could always have been sweet with someone who loved her.

There’s a button on the inside of her skirt that she has to undo before he can slide his hand in past her waistband. He touches her feather-light, makes her shiver, makes her clench one hand in his eleven shirts and get the other arm around his neck. It should be like this—they should be at home in his kitchen. She should be looking over his shoulder out the window and seeing the careful ring he made of the back patio. She closes her eyes and presses her forehead to his shoulder, and he works her up slowly with his fingers. When she

comes she moans into his chest and grinds down into his hand and thinks, *Just let me have this. Let me be with him without thinking about every moment I didn't have with him. I have him now, so let me move on so he and I can start our life. Let me give up every bad thing I've done and go forward with him next to me.*

14. Inside Out and About

Summary for the Chapter:

Ben and Bev get coffee. Bev makes a phone call, and then reenacts a memory. The Losers celebrate the holidays. Mike approaches the multiverse.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry there was such a delay on this one; I'm getting creatively burned out a little bit, but I can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. I think two more chapters, and then I'm going to take a break before the third official installment in this series (Bill's) so that I do justice to it. In the meantime I'm going to attempt National Novel Writer Month (if you follow me on twitter @ifithollers you might have seen a little bit about this), but don't expect that in a timely manner either.

Content warnings: victim-blaming, domestic abuse & intimate partner violence (Tom), memories of slut-shaming (Mrs. Kaspbrak), memories of childhood sexual abuse. General disapproval of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. Limited spoilers for *UR* by Stephen King. References to One Direction. The author does not understand quantum physics or wave functions.

Bev calls him from court.

Ben picks up his phone immediately. It's like two in the afternoon and usually she takes longer before she lets him know to be waiting in the lobby; he's almost certain there's been some kind of catastrophe. He tries to tamp down on his panic.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"What?" Bev says. "Yeah. I just—do you want to meet me somewhere?"

He closes his laptop without saving his file. There's nothing he can do with this project anyway; he's going to end up designing it over and over, and if there's value in any part of it, it'll keep.

"Uh, sure. Where?"

"I'm about to get in a car with other Ben and have him recommend me a place, I just wanted to know if you were free."

Is that even in question? "I'm—I'm free, yeah. I'll—I can—"

Mercifully Bev interrupts him. "Okay, great, I'll text you the address when I have one."

"Thank you," he says. He shakes his head. "I'll see you there. Love you."

"I love you too."

Ben, who had been hanging out in two shirts and his pajama pants, puts on one more shirt and a pair of jeans, and then remembers it's December in Chicago and puts on his massive coat. Bev texts him an address, and he plugs it into his GPS and takes the Caddy.

It's a very long, narrow diner that looks straight out of *Nighthawks*. He can see Bev in the corner through the window. She looks very soft and pulled together, with her cloche hat and her thick scarf. He looks at her and thinks *New York City, 1920s*. When Ben opens the door there's a bell overhead that dings, and she looks up warily and then smiles once she recognizes him. He gets to watch the clouds pass over her face and then clear.

"Hey," he says. He walks over to the table and takes the other seat. "Get out early?"

"I feel like I'm back in school or something," Bev says.

"Hey, can I borrow your homework for sosh class?"

"We had homework?"

He smiles at her.

A waitress comes by, offers them menus, and asks if they want coffee.

“Oh, yes, please,” Bev says.

“Got to stay warm,” says the waitress. She goes back behind the counter and Ben loses sight of her.

“Everything okay today?” he asks Bev.

Bev nods, takes off her hat, and tucks it into her purse under the table. He hears the clink of the straps. “Yeah, I’m just tired.”

She’s been tired for a while. He’s glad she went out with Kay last night. It’s very easy, when you’re isolated in a city, to get used to going to work and coming back to the hotel, and letting that become your whole world. It bodes well that she’s taking steps to fight that exhaustion and isolation.

“Have you been here before?” Ben asks.

“Not in ages,” Bev replies. “Not since I was... just out of college and waiting tables.”

He looks around. “Did you work here?”

“Yeah,” she says, faint grin on her face.

“Really?” He can feel himself grinning back, just because she’s smiling. He heard that, in the absence of the sun, sunflowers turn towards each other. That’s Beverly.

“What?”

He shakes his head; he’s still smiling. “I don’t know.”

“No, what?”

He doesn’t know what Bev looked like, fresh out of college, but he imagines it. Snow on the sidewalk outside, parking lot an ice slick, salt stains on her boots, wrapping up in her coat and scarf before going outside. The way it would feel to look in on the big glass windows after dark, with the warm yellow light bleeding out onto the

snow, and see a tired girl with red hair, a notepad, and a pen.

“I used to work for moving companies,” he says.

Her eyebrows lift. “Really?”

“Yeah. We’d all pack, and then we’d take the truck back to headquarters and someone else would drive. I could have made more money driving, but...” He shrugs. “I’m not like you, I’m not a great night driver.”

“You did all right,” she says.

“I had to,” he says. He shakes his head again. “I’ll do early mornings, but I don’t think I’m ever going to like driving at night.” Especially not now that the high beams remind him of flashlights, or of headlamps, cutting through the dark.

“I can’t believe you made me fall in love with you and then you revealed you’re a morning person,” Bev says, her tone all mock betrayal.

He smiles at her because he can’t help it, and he’s still grinning when the waitress comes back with two mugs and a pot of coffee. He realizes belatedly that he hasn’t so much as looked at the menu.

“I think we need a few more minutes,” Bev says diplomatically. He wonders if the menu has changed since she worked here. It doesn’t seem like that kind of place; it feels like a landmark. Like maybe this place hasn’t changed in twenty-seven years either.

The waitress nods indulgently and walks away.

“You’re going to have to tell me what’s good here,” Ben tells Bev.

She’s reaching for the little ramekin with creamer and sugar packets. “I don’t know if I can be trusted with that kind of power.”

“I would trust no one else.” She’s frowning; he plays back what he just said, looking for his misstep. “What’s the matter?”

“We’re out of sugar,” she says. “Just stevia.”

“Oh,” Ben says. He turns around in his chair and leans back to check the other table. He lifts the packets, checks the labels to make sure it’s real sugar, and returns with three pink packets. “Got it.” He sets them down on the table in front of her.

Bev blinks at the packets.

He inclines his head. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Bev says. “Did I tell you how I take my coffee?”

“Oh,” Ben says. “No, did I just—”

“No, no, you got it right,” she says, ripping open one of the packets and tipping it in her coffee. “I need to cut down on the sugar, I just. Was surprised, that’s all.”

Ben, who has been rationing sugar as viciously as if he’s growing all his food in a Victory Garden since he was sixteen years old, shakes his head. “I mean, whatever you want. Sorry, I should have asked.” He remembers taking note of how she likes her coffee on their breakfast date. He will never, ever suggest that she needs to cut down on anything at all in the world. She could look at him, tired from court and her eyeliner slightly smudged under her eyelids and ask for the heart from his chest, and he’d find a way to give it to her.

“No, no, no, you’re right.” She blinks several times as she opens the remaining two packets. “Sorry, I don’t know why I’m being weird.”

“You’re not being weird.”

He loves how she looks unimpressed at him. The arch of her brows, the slant of her eyelids, the crook to the corner of her mouth. She’s always been beautiful, but he likes her best when she’s more than that. Her self shines through, capable and magnificent.

Come on, Ben. This is a diner on a weekday. Get it together.

“You’re not,” he insists. “I’m being weird. Tell me what to order.”

Bev wants to go home.

Now that they're done trying to show that Tom was an unfit husband, Amanda has stepped back somewhat and allowed Kay's divorce attorney Marianne to take over the matter of property division. In this case, that means the label.

Bev wants the label. It's her creative work—not exclusively hers, there are designers working there with her, but far more than it was ever Tom's creative work. Bev has gotten up and testified about Tom looking over her designs early on in their relationship. He told her she was talented. In the moment she found him and his compliments sweet; now when she looks back, she's almost recognizes the frightened look on his face. Not the one when she wielded the belt in her hand, but the one when she was trying to blow him off and pack her bag for Derry.

Tom wants the label too, of course. He's got his attorney up there arguing that, regardless of what happens in a man's personal life, he shouldn't lose his completely unrelated assets.

Amanda Johnson sucks her teeth.

After one more day in which the court combs through Bev's financial records while Tom sits watching her on the other side of the room, Bev calls Eddie. She's hiding in the ladies' room, actually, leaning on the sink instead of sneaking cigarettes in a stall the way she wants to. When she smokes her lipstick feathers, and she's trying to keep from having to blot out her features and paint them back in more than once a day.

"Eddie Kaspbrak speaking," he says. He has a phone voice that makes him sound like any attorney out there.

She smiles and uses her own customer-service voice in return. "This is Beverly Marsh for Eddie Kaspbrak; does Mr. Kaspbrak have time for a consult?"

"For Ms. Marsh?" Eddie asks. "He does." He drops the affect. "I'm handing in a report tomorrow but it's basically all wrapped up. What's going on?"

Bev gives a thin little laugh. “How’s your divorce going?”

There is quiet for a moment. Then Eddie just sighs.

“That well?” Bev asks.

“Did you have a prenup?” he asks.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

She raises her eyebrows; she feels the same dull surprise she felt on learning that Eddie didn’t grow up to be a doctor or something.
“Really?”

“Yeah. I thought about it. I didn’t—didn’t want to give myself an out, actually. So it’s... I mean, discovery went fine, she’s keeping the house, it’s all...” He sighs again and then begins speaking very rapidly: “I always come home and I’m like, well, might as well try skydiving, right? Or like, one of those bars where they drunkenly throw axes. Also Richie has an encyclopedic knowledge of east Hollywood bars and he has—we’ve been to some stupid places. I’m going a little crazy. I mean—it’s better, things are better, but—nothing compared to what you’re doing, I mean. I’m having a midlife crisis.”

Aren’t they all?

“Tell me you’re doing karaoke bars,” Bev says.

“Do you think I will ever voluntarily enter a karaoke bar with Richie Tozier?” Eddie asks. He pauses for a moment and then says, “Because we’ve been to two and he had to get me hammered before I would cross the threshold.”

Bev laughs. “Oh my god, what did you sing?”

“No,” Eddie says.

“Come on.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll ask Richie.”

“Richie did some weird shit at karaoke I’m sure he doesn’t want the rest of you to find out about either, so I’m gonna play the blackmail card.”

“I don’t believe that Richie has any shame.”

“I have watched his fans come up to him and interact with him, and you would be wrong about that. Sometimes he takes off his glasses in public and hopes they won’t be able to tell it’s him.”

“I’ve been walking around in like thirty pounds of winterwear trying to do the same thing,” Bev says, though in her case it’s for paparazzi grubbing for details about her romantic relationships. Her broken marriage. Ben.

“It’s warm here,” Eddie says.

“I know. Mike keeps offering to fly up, but I don’t know why he’d leave Orlando in December to come to Chicago.” There feels like very little to say after that, so Bev just sighs. “I’m so tired, Eddie.”

“I know,” he says.

“We can’t run the label together. And he’s never going to let me buy him out. He’s not gonna... He’s not a *fade into obscurity* kind of man, he’s always around, and I don’t want...” She isn’t sure what she’s saying.

Eddie waits and then asks, “What do you remember about my mother?”

After Neibolt the first time—her snarling at them all outside, and Eddie in the passenger seat with his broken arm. The way that he turned his face from Bill and Bev as she drove off with him.

“She hated me,” Bev says. Mrs. Kaspbrak called her a *dirty girl*, as if she knew anything about Bev. As if she knew anything about what happened behind the front door of the Marsh apartment.

"She hated anything she couldn't control," Eddie says.

And that rings so true, strikes a chord so deep down in Bev's heart, that she leans her head against the tiled wall of the bathroom and looks up at the long narrow window. Part of her wants to light a cigarette right now, but she can't risk getting caught.

Tom hates things he can't control. He liked Beverly best when she was under his thumb (*under him*), and he never liked Kay, calling her *that titsy women's lib bitch* or calling Lesley *that bull dyke*. He seemed to hate his brothers and sisters, though there are a lot of them and he's the oldest. Bev was never sure whether that was normal for people with large families, having accepted that she'd grown up an only child and that was a world she would never understand. Sometimes, when he was very drunk, he cried when he mentioned his mother, and then that tearfulness would swiftly turn to rage, as though he couldn't stand that vulnerability. He liked his image to be under his control, too; and he didn't like the idea of Bev being able to see more than he wanted her to see.

And Bev spent her whole life accepting that she couldn't control things—people, her father, her husband—and trying to play by their rules anyway. Once she told Tom that she fully expected him to go too far one day and kill her—and he said, *Do it my way, babe, and that day will never come*. And Bev tried. But Tom's way meant no more independent direction than his eye or his arm, and he couldn't control her in the end, so he must hate her now.

That's okay. She hates him too. Loves him, in the way you love a man who drunkenly admitted his worst fears to you and let you hold him in your arms. But it's all buried under deep discomfort, under guilt for still feeling that little attachment like a vine not ready to come off a trellis, under contempt for what he did to her and moreso for Kay, and then more guilt for being angrier about what he did to Kay than what he did to her.

Back when she and her father first started to circle each other in the apartment—like there was something building between them, a tension so tangible her mother asked her seriously *Has he ever touched you?*—back when Bev had no idea why she was suddenly so frightened of her father, only that she was, she remembered thinking

how nice it would be to go back to the days when things were uncomplicated. Her father always hit her—boxed her ear for whining when he was tired, or thumped her for bothering her mother in the grocery store—but eventually she understood the cause and effect there. When she first became aware enough to perceive him as *threat*, she felt that guilt, because he was still the man who taught her to tie her shoes, who used to come home and ask her if she wanted to walk out to the mailbox with him, who seriously poured her a cup of milk with breakfast when her mother slept in on her days off.

It occurs to her, in the ladies' room, that she doesn't know how to love without guilt. Even with Ben, there's some of that—how could she have mistaken his postcard for Bill's, not just when she was a thirteen-year-old girl dazzled by first love, but again after thirty years? How could Ben have brought himself to smile like that when she said *I remember a kiss*?

She goes back to the hotel to Ben and asks, “Did your lawyer tell you what Tom wanted in exchange for dropping charges against you?”

Ben, who was hunched over on the tiny coffee table and staring hard at a sketchpad when she came in, blinks up at her. “Yes,” he says. “I thought your lawyer told you about that.”

“She did,” Bev says. “I said no because I didn’t think you’d want me to say yes.”

“You’re right,” Ben says.

Bev stares at him for several long moments. Something about his face right now reminds her of the stairs in the Derry Townhouse. The way he looked at her when she brought the postcard back from her walking tour of her childhood nightmare. She said *I remember a boy. Not him, the way he made me feel. And... a kiss. And the more I look, the clearer I can see...* But she couldn’t see clearly at all, it turns out.

“Did we kiss when we were kids?”

“Uh.”

He blinks at her and sets down his pencil. Bev feels an absurd urge to

apologize, to go into the bedroom and take a shower and try to reset because he's clearly busy. But Ben always drops whatever he's doing for her.

He's embarrassed, a faint flush on his cheeks. "Uh, kind of. You—when we found you in the deadlights. We couldn't get you down."

You'll float too. And she had. For a time.

"So I—and I was very, uh—this was not okay, but in my defense, all my research had led me to believe that true love's kiss could do anything," Ben says. "So I tried it, and nothing happened, and all the guys kind of looked at me like I was a moron, and then you woke up."

Bev blinks at him. "Was I your first kiss?"

Ben shakes his head quickly. "Nope, you didn't agree to that, it doesn't count."

"I want it to count," she says.

He blinks once, all big brown eyes. "I. Okay, then. It counts."

She turns toward the refrigerator. Ben keeps stocking it with fruit salad, which seems to be a good third of his diet. She pulls out a container of grapes and starts popping them into her mouth, not because she's hungry but because she wants to crush something between her teeth.

"I've been thinking about telling Marianne that I want a buy out," she says. She keeps her eyes on Ben's face, watching him process it. She's sure he'd never hide anything from her on purpose, not if he knew she wanted to know it, but he's so used to putting himself away she wants to see what surfaces before he starts sorting through his feelings and rationalizing.

"As in, you want him to buy you out of the company?" Ben asks, like he's just making sure.

She sighs. "Yeah. Take my money and walk away. Tell him they can't use my name anymore. I haven't contributed anything to the spring

collection anyway, so if they do fashion week in New York this spring none of it'll be mine. I could go somewhere else. Become a creative officer somewhere else.”

It's a gamble. She's had offers like that in the past but never really considered them—how could she consider them, when she had her own brand with her husband? But now Mike's speculation about whether they'd do well in the future, about whether they could expect the same level of success they'd enjoyed ever since they left Derry, seems intimidating.

It's not the money she needs. She can't even get copyright for her designs, because that's not how the world works—there are a thousand knockoffs as soon as any of her collections come out, and no theft happening because people buying the knockoffs wouldn't be buying Rogan&Marsh at full price anyway. It's just the idea of walking away from everything she worked hard on for years that intimidates her—and she's sure she can do that eventually. You have to let go of the past at some point in order to move on. Look at Eddie. Beverly wants to move on.

Ben is watching her, his expression the carefully receptive one he wears when he wants her to talk to him about something—as though an errantly placed eyebrow or a carelessly batted eyelash will make her turn tail and bolt. He makes space for her. Provides a background for her. *Fabric that holds other fabric up*. But that's not quite right, not for him.

“Is that what you want?” he asks.

Bev gnashes grapes. “I want it to be over with,” she says. “I want to take you and go.”

Ben blinks again. “I'm not going anywhere,” he says. “At least, not without you.”

She swallows. “I've spent so much time without you. Maybe when I'm eighty years old—if I live to be eighty years old—I'll look back and go *I wish I hadn't spent so much time on my divorce. I wish I'd just run away with Ben.*”

How many people, at the age of forty-one, get the chance to completely start over? And how many people have the ability to take that chance when it comes? Bev wants to be one of them, but she's always had to be pushed before she would run.

"Maybe," Ben agrees.

She looks at him and smiles. "But?"

"Maybe when I'm eighty years old, I'll think, *I wish I hadn't been so selfish, I wish I'd let Beverly take the company and lived as her kept man for the rest of my life.*"

Bev laughs. "Is that what you want?"

"I just want to be around you," Ben says.

He makes Bev's heart hurt. Not all in a bad way. But it's a deep ache.

"We're going to Los Angeles for Christmas," Ben says. "You can take the time to make up your mind. Make your New Year's resolution and everything. Nobody's saying that everything has to be in place now."

"If not now," Bev says.

They look at each other then.

"I'm glad we had an awkward first kiss in a cistern with all our friends looking at you like you were insane," she says.

He smiles, but it's sad. "Did you remember it?"

"No," she says. "I'm still glad."

Glad that even if he wasn't her first date, or her first boyfriend, or her first husband—they were a first *something*. And she's used to these sudden bright and new understandings of herself and her life by now. She'd like to go back and overwrite the past with something good, something that never had to hurt, something that doesn't fill her with shame.

She smiles at him. “Show me how it went.”

He raises his eyebrows and then smiles as he understands, a little rueful. “Oh god, it was full on eighties movie first kiss,” Ben says. “Are you sure you want to know?”

She nods at him.

He gets up from the couch, leaving his sketchpad behind, and comes across the living area to the kitchenette. Bev swallows her grapes and waits, watching him. He lays both hands on her cheeks, very carefully.

“Except you were taller than me,” he says.

Even when she hops up onto the counter he’s still taller than her. “Close enough,” she says, because she likes that about him.

“Okay, are you ready? It was not good,” Ben says.

His palms press a little harder into her cheeks, making her lips pout into a fish face; and he puckers his lips dramatically and touches them carefully to hers. Then he steps back and releases her with his hands outstretched, like *I did it*.

Bev bursts out laughing. “You didn’t even close your eyes?”

“Nope. I was terrified,” he says.

She reaches out with one foot to hook her ankle behind his leg and reel him back in. “Come here.” She gets a handful of his shirts and kisses him properly—sweet, feeling herself smile into it.

“Well, that’s not how it went at all,” Ben says, smiling back at her.

It doesn’t spark any memories, but Bev has a sudden and blindingly clear image of a daisy in her head. Not one of the thick-stemmed Gerber daisies with the heads as big as her hands, but a long and thin flower you could wind through hair, through fingers. She can see the way that the white petals push out from the yellow cap. She blinks and it goes, and there’s just him. He smiled that way when he prompted her: *New kid?* And some deep part of her brain whispered

his name.

“That’s all right,” she says. “This is better.”

They go to Los Angeles for Richie’s birthday, but they plan to stay through Christmas.

Ben has a list of touristy things to do pulled up on his phone, but—as they all eat birthday cake and cold pizza for hangover breakfast on Christmas Eve—Richie keeps giving them horrified looks.

“Because it’s three hours,” he says. “And once you get in, do you know how hard it is to get out? There are like... eight thousand tiny children all super excited to see the Holiday Celebration, and then everyone else is at the Coliseum to see the Rams game. Do not go downtown. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars.”

Mike, who is reading over Ben’s shoulder, says, “The Holiday Celebration won an Emmy.”

“I won an Emmy, do not take that as a—”

Eddie says, “You did *what?*” around a mouthful of birthday cake. Ben is actually pretty impressed that Eddie’s eating cake for breakfast, since it seems like the least Eddie Kaspbrak thing a person can do. He tried to tell his brain *Eddie’s a role model, I can have cake, it’s fine*, and his brain came back with a bunch of screeching railroad-crossing alarms, so he’s having cold pizza with carrot juice. Instead of sugar, the juice is flavored with ginger. It tastes terrible.

Bev is also eating cake. She slept in last night’s clothes—one of Ben’s sweaters that she stole from him when she got cold on the plane, actually—and instead of looking hungover she looks rumpled and cute. She definitely has a headache, he can tell by the way she’s squinting, but Eddie handed out ibuprofen and water to everyone and generally did an uncanny impression of a camp counselor handing out snacks for the upcoming hike. Ben lays his head on her shoulder to watch her turn to look at him and smile.

Richie, who is eating his third piece of birthday cake, frowns at them.

“You all know I write for shows, right? Like, this is not news to you.”

“2009,” says Mike.

Ben watches and can see the moment that Richie remembers Mike has Google alerts on all of them, because his eyes get huge behind his glasses.

“You didn’t say you won an Emmy,” Eddie says.

“Because the writers’ room won an Emmy, it’s not my Emmy personally—do you think that if I had an Emmy in this apartment you could have not noticed it? I would be moving that shit around like Elf on the Shelf every morning. I would carry it around strapped to my shoulder like Long—and I do mean *Long*—John Silver.”

“Nuh-uh,” Ben says, because he’s used to Richie’s games by now. “Mike, what did Richie do he doesn’t want us to find out about?”

Bev, Mike, and Eddie all lift their heads and stare at Richie. Then Bev and Eddie turn to look at Mike.

Richie looks *caught*. “Damn, Haystack, what did I ever do to you?”

“I’m sure there’s something in the bank,” Ben replies. He’s pulling up Richie’s Wikipedia page on his phone. Bev leans over to read over his shoulder.

This is how they discover that Richie was involved in a lot of voiceover for animated movies. Mike starts reading off the list, not sounding surprised by any of them, and Richie stares straight down at his cake like he’s hoping it was poisoned.

Eddie leaps across the kitchen and stands over by the door, brandishing his fork in Richie’s direction. “The lesbians with the tiny robot!”

Ben has no idea what that means.

“Cool,” Richie says. “Cool cool cool. I’m too hungover for this, so I’m gonna go back to bed and hopefully smother myself, and all of you can do whatever you want. And—” He picks up his plate with his

cake on it. “—I’m taking this with me.” He gives a zombie smile and then retreats to his room.

“If you get crumbs in the sheets, forty-one’s going to be a real short year for you!” Eddie calls after him.

“I’m eating with my hands!”

The door closes.

Eddie turns to look at Ben. “We’re streaming the fuck out of those, right?” Eddie seems to have accepted Ben as a technological wizard, which amuses Ben enough that he’s decided just to go with it.

Ben raises his eyebrows and looks at Bev.

Bev seems to consider and then she says, “I would like to watch a lot of completely unrelated animated movies for Christmas Eve.”

“I’ve seen them,” Mike says. “Some of them are not bad, but most of them are pretty bad.”

“Good,” says Bev.

Ben feels like he’s in college again. The kind of college experience other people had, where they hung out with friends instead of spending over twenty-four hours in the computer lab crying when their angles didn’t come out the way they needed.

As they watch a ton of animated movies—Bev, Eddie, and Ben are playing a game called *Spot Trashmouth* in which whoever correctly identifies which animated character Richie is voicing in this movie gets the points, which makes Mike nod thoughtfully and Richie cringe like his skin’s crawling—Ben scrolls through the list of touristy things to do in Los Angeles in December. Bev elected not to sit in her own chair and is leaning back across his lap, reading the items off his phone. Most of the things are already sold out or closed, since it’s Christmas Eve already.

“Do you want to see the Forest of Light?” he murmurs to her.

She nods.

He keeps scrolling. “It’s the zoo’s fiftieth anniversary.”

“We can do that.” She takes his phone out of his hand and scrolls down the list, then asks, “Do you know how to ice skate?”

“I know how to ice skate.”

“Do you feel like living out a Hallmark movie?”

“I am living out a Hallmark movie,” Ben replies, and kisses the top of her head.

“That’s sweet,” Bev says. “But we murdered a clown this year.”

Eddie, oblivious to their conversation, points at the screen. “It’s the purple guy. Definitely the purple guy. You did that voice in traffic the other day.”

“I fucking did not,” Richie says.

“You absolutely did, it’s the purple guy—Mike?”

“It’s the purple guy,” Mike agrees calmly.

Ben cries during the animated movie. He tries to be discreet about it, but Bev is literally on top of him and when she glances back at him she’s smiling. “Hang tough,” she murmurs.

Eddie is staring with rapt attention. “Holy shit this is a good movie.”

“It’s the thirteenth-highest-grossing animated film of all time,” Mike reports.

Richie pulls the collar of his shirt over his head and sits hunched in the chair. “We’re too old for this.”

“Shush,” Eddie commands.

“It’s the thirty-fifth-highest-grossing film of all time,” Mike adds.

Eddie abandons his own *silence is golden* philosophy and turns around to say, “*What the fuck, Richard?*”

Bev is not scheduled back in court until January, so they have time to hang out in Los Angeles. They don't spend all of it camped out in Eddie and Richie's apartment—they get a hotel room, and Mike sets up at a different hotel and joins them for museum trips. Ben gets stuck staring at a stained-glass display of Michelangelo's *The Last Supper*.

Bev appears beside him. "Did you see *The Da Vinci Code*?"

"I did see *The Da Vinci Code*," he replies.

"I got probably madder than I should have about *The Da Vinci Code*," she says.

Mike, across the mausoleum and viewing some other stained-glass windows, turns and whispers, "Are you all talking about *The Da Vinci Code*?" He quickly crosses the room and leans down to use his museum voice. "That shit is messed up."

Bev turns and looks at him with complete vindication on her face. "Right?"

Sometimes it's easy to forget that, on top of being a librarian, Mike's a historian. His specialty might be their old corner of Maine, but Ben vaguely remembers being young and admiring Mike's genuine interest in learning for learning's sake. Ben always went to the library because the space meant something to him—the possibility, the sudden sensation that he was no longer alone, even if his companions were old librarians and older texts, but Mike used to go out into the world like an explorer and bring back pieces. Bits of old metal from the Kitchener Ironworks, which Ben was terrified of after that photo of the head in the tree. Stones from the Apocalyptic Rock Fight. It makes total sense that Mike would eventually move into the library. Ben needs walls; Mike needs to fill them.

"Bill said you found a new line of research," Ben says quietly.

Mike's face changes in a way Ben doesn't quite recognize. His eyebrows lift slightly and he stares through the stained glass instead of making eye contact. There's something wary about his look, something that makes Ben's nerves start to rattle a little.

"I did," he says softly.

Ben waits. He's not going to press, but he watches Mike shift slightly there, his gaze flicking over the apostles.

At last Mike looks down at Ben. "I'll show you," he says. "I told Bill on the phone. But—" He glances around, like he's concerned they're being watched. The cavernous length of the museum means that their whispers carry. If Ben were to close his eyes, he's sure he could hear dripping water from the ceiling.

He turns and reaches for Bev. By now she knows this look on his face. She loops her fingers through his without comment. Her nails are carefully manicured and painted with champagne polish, bland and inoffensive for court; her fingertips are callused, and he loves her. He runs his thumb across the pads of her fingers and she looks at him with a question in her face.

"Where?" Bev asks Mike in an undertone. Nonetheless, her voice echoes off the walls. *A weak old woman*, Ben hears her say.

"We need to leave anyway," Ben says, watching the apprehensive look on Mike's face. He's been doing okay in the clear light of museum exhibits, but this just smells too much like old stone and time. "This is—" He gestures at the mausoleum at length with his free hand and then lets it fall back to his side.

Mike's brow furrows slightly. "All right," he says. Ben can see wheels turning behind his eyes. Then he says, "Back to mine. Leave Richie and Eddie out of this." He shakes his head before Ben can ask. "You'll see."

What Mike wants to show them is, apparently, a bright pink Kindle.

At first Ben doesn't understand why complete secrecy was necessary for this, because Mike's been carrying the gadget around all day in his leather bag. He's pulled a number of things out of there—sunglasses, his other neutral-colored e-reader, the reading glasses he calls *cheaters*, his wallet. But before Mike takes out the Kindle he goes across the hotel room and lowers the curtains. They're on the second floor.

Ben watches Bev, but she looks unconcerned as Mike shuffles around the room. She sets her purse down on the end of the made hotel bed and watches Mike in turn. Mike was more frantic than this, back in Derry—desperate for them to understand and to believe. Now there's a level of control to his movements. Granted, he's acting like he's in a spy thriller, but the deliberation tells Ben that, for Mike at least, this isn't life or death.

It reminds him of Bev, actually. He looks at her face and sees that sort of inevitability mirrored on her face. Bev gearing up for a fight.

"Okay," Mike says, and takes the Kindle out of his bag. He holds it up with both hands wrapped around it. "So this is a Kindle."

Ben has limited experience with Amazon Kindle. He travels for work and frequently has a lot of time to kill, so he tends to try new tech when it comes out. E-readers didn't do much for him; he got hooked on his phone instead, preferring to have everything available in the palm of his hand and not to have to switch between gadgets, and that works for him so far. He's not in the phase of his life yet where he's resigned to building smart houses, but he has smartboards in his office at the firm's headquarters. If Ben is subject to any particular fallacies, the idea that things and people improve over time is probably the biggest. He made a token attempt at reading Bill's latest novel on his phone on the flight out to Derry, but it turned out to be about werewolves and he gave up and started drinking on the flight instead.

"I can see that," Bev says obligingly.

Mike holds it up in front of his chest. "I did not order it," he says. "I was a small-town public librarian, I have a master's in library science, I know how bad Amazon is. I did not purchase this Kindle. At first I thought it was from one of you, so I called Bill, because..." He shrugs.

"Because books," Bev surmises.

"Exactly," Mike says. "But Bill said it wasn't from him. And my next guess was that it was going to be from one of you—" He glances at Ben and grimaces in a way that says *I haven't forgotten the check for*

ten thousand dollars for my junker truck. “—but I didn’t tell any of you where I was staying. I didn’t even know I could get mail at the hotel.”

“I didn’t send it,” Ben replies.

Bev shakes her head. “And Eddie won’t buy from Amazon.”

“Right, and I’ve had this for over a month. Richie can’t go that long without making a joke.” Mike holds it up again. “So I opened it up, and...” He shakes the Kindle slightly. It’s an old-fashioned one, with a big keyboard taking up a lot of the space that, these days, is dedicated to just the screen. “This Kindle,” he says, “has access to parallel universes.”

Ben and Bev both stare at him for several long moments.

“Okay,” Ben says.

“Really,” Mike says.

“No, I believe you,” Ben says, because he does. He has no reason to disbelieve Mike. Objectively, this is not any weirder than anything else that has happened to them over the course of their lives, except that It had happened to them through what felt like being in the wrong place at the wrong time (*dreaming the right dream at the wrong time*). A worlds-spanning Kindle apparently sought Mike out while he was on vacation.

“Over ten million of them,” Mike goes on.

Ben nods. He’s not a physicist, but he’s seen clips of Stephen Hawking trying to explain to fans of a band that broke up that there exist infinite alternate worlds in which that band is still together. He’s sure that there are worlds in which his mother survived chemo; there are worlds in which she never got sick in the first place; there are worlds in which he joined the track team; there are worlds in which he never lost the weight; there are worlds in which he never met the Losers; there are worlds in which Henry Bowers killed him that day on the bridge by cutting him open.

“You are taking this very well,” Mike says.

Bev says, “I’ve been dreaming about Stan.”

Ben turns to look at her, surprised. He knew some of it, but usually when she has a dream like that she tells him about it. The last time she mentioned Stan was... right after he punched out Tom, actually.

“We’re in a fabric store,” she says. “But that’s only how it looks to me, and not to him. And there are all these bolts of cloth, but... they’re worlds. Stan saw starlings.” She glances at Ben once and then looks away.

“Okay,” Mike says. “What do you know about quantum mechanics?”

Ben closes his eyes and admits, “Everything I know about quantum mechanics is associated with One Direction.” Predictably, when he opens his eyes both Bev and Mike are looking at him, perplexed. Ben shrugs. “I mean, they’re no New Kids on the Block, but Stephen Hawking publicly commented on their breakup.”

“Okay,” Mike says. “Keep in mind that I am a public librarian and not a physicist of any kind. All right?”

“Mike, I still think you’re basically our leading expert on magic,” Ben says.

Mike shakes his head. “Cosmological shit like this, you have to throw away the rulebook.”

Bev twitches suddenly, the hand resting on her purse spasming toward her body and then up to her mouth.

“What?” Ben asks.

She shakes her head. “Nothing. I had a dream.” She closes her eyes. “Go on.”

Mike glances between them and then says, “So are you familiar with Schrödinger’s cat?”

“Passing familiar,” Bev replies. “It’s entered pop culture by now.”

“Right,” Mike says. “What’s your understanding of it?”

Bev shrugs. “You have a box with a cat in it. The box has a sealed vial of poison in it that’s set to go off at a certain time but you don’t know when, so you can’t know if the cat’s alive or dead unless you open the box.”

“Yes and no,” Mike says. “The point of the thought experiment is not to prove whether the cat is alive or dead. The fact that we don’t know whether the cat has died yet or not, but that we know it’s going to die at some point, means that the cat is both alive and dead. It’s a quantum superposition.”

“Ah, yes,” says Bev. “A quantum superposition.”

“So that’s the thought experiment,” Mike says. “And the point is that a quantum superposition, where two mutually exclusive things happen at one time, is bananas.”

Bev snorts.

“No, it is,” Mike says. “You’re either dead or you’re not, or that’s how things should be, but...”

She grins widely. “But we know better.”

Mike’s smile is fond. “Yeah,” he says. “We know better, now.” He holds up the Kindle. “One world in which the cat is alive, and one world in which the cat is dead. *Ad infinitum.*”

“Over ten million times?” Ben asks, looking at the gadget’s pink plastic shell.

“Over ten million times,” Mike agrees. “If we agree that infinity is over ten million, which it is.”

“Sure,” Ben replies. He’s thinking of Escher prints. “And your Kindle gets books from other worlds.”

“It does,” Mike says. “Every time I download from the UR Bookstore, I have to agree to abide by something called the paradox laws.”

Ben gives Mike a quizzical look.

“That’s what the Kindle calls them,” Mike says. “It doesn’t say *searching over ten million worlds*, it says *over ten million URs searched*.”

“UR—like, er?” Bev asks.

“Capital-U, Capital-R,” Mike says. “I’m also not allowed to disseminate any UR novels, in accordance with the paradox laws.”

“What are the paradox laws?” Bev asks.

“I think they’re there to stop me from fucking with the timelines,” he says. “This reality has a number—an UR number, even if I’m not sure which one it is. This Kindle—” He holds up the Kindle again. “—says that it’s in a certain UR, but I’m pretty sure it didn’t come from this UR, because if we as a society had many-worlds Kindles...” He shrugs.

“Yeah, we could have just about anything,” Bev agrees. “Show me.” She scoots over on the bed and sets her purse down on the floor. Mike sits next to her on the bed, in the middle, leaving room for Ben to sit on the other side. Ben leans over to look as Mike opens up the Kindle.

The screen comes on in color, which Ben is almost certain wasn’t an option when these early Kindles were rattling around. Mike opens up an app called *Experimental* and then an app called *UR Functions*, disregarding *Text-to-Speech* and *Music Downloads*. He clicks quickly into something called *UR Books*, but there’s also *UR News Archive* and *UR Local*.

“Mike,” Ben says.

Mike shakes his head. “Hold on. We’ll get there.”

The screen says *Welcome to UR Books!* in red text, over a logo Ben is certain has never been affiliated with Amazon. It looks like a tarot card—a tower with no discernible features, just all black pixels. Then a search bar appears and invites Mike to *Select author: your choices may not be available*.

“So I’m pretty sure that I can’t do this specific demonstration with Bill, in accordance with the paradox laws,” Mike says. He’s typing in

William, and Ben knows what he means to look up. “I’ve tried to open them up—I can search the web on this, but... Do you remember how it was in the Townhouse?”

Ben closes his eyes. “I tried to look up what day it was,” he says. “And I couldn’t remember.”

“Yes,” Mike says. “I can get the document open, but I can’t hold it in my head.”

“Can you remember what you read from other stuff?” Bev asks, her tone anxious. Ben opens his eyes to look at her.

“Oh, yeah,” Mike says. “Shakespeare wrote a play called *A Black Fellow in London*, can you believe it? As they say, he’s a little confused, but he got the spirit.” He shrugs and hits enter, and the screen loads for a full ten seconds. They sit there staring at it, adults gawping over a pink e-reader, until the screen spits out more text.

10,438,721 URs searched. 13,394 William Denbrough titles detected. If you do not know title, select UR, or return to UR Functions. Selections from your current UR will not be displayed.

“For those of you keeping track at home,” Mike says, “Bill’s only written five novels in this UR.”

“And they’re not displayed?” Ben asks, looking at the screen.

Bev frowns. “That’s his book,” she says. “They made that into a movie. It had a different name, but I saw it in the theater.”

Mike selects the option for *The Black Rapids* and they look at it. “What do you notice about this?” he asks.

Ben feels very strongly that Mike’s public librarian is showing, but he can’t deny the teaching style’s effectiveness. The header is a series of numbers: 117586, followed by *William Zachary Denbrough. September 15, 1946 – present.*

“What?” Bev says. Ben looks across Mike at her, but she’s staring down at the Kindle. “That’s not...” She trails off.

“Not our Bill’s birthdate,” Mike replies. “But in this UR it is.” He clicks out of *The Black Rapids* and selects a nearly identical icon. There are slight differences to the cover for this other edition of *The Black Rapids*, but when Mike opens this one up it was written by a *William Zachry Denbrough* instead of *Zachary*, and his birthdate is listed as *January 4, 1976*.

“That’s not right either,” Bev says.

“No,” Mike replies. “Because it’s not from this UR.”

“Is Bill’s middle name Zachary?” Ben asks, nonplussed.

“In most URs,” Mike replies. “I found one where it’s Alan. No idea why.”

“And he always writes *The Black Rapids*? ”

“Always,” Mike replies. “And usually the werewolf one.”

Ben shudders. He was never spooked by werewolves as a kid, but being trapped in a bathroom with one and six other kids will put you off a lot of things. Apparently, like a lot of artists, Bill likes to work out his phobias through art. Ben feels that they should have come to that conclusion a lot earlier, as soon as they figured out Bill was writing horror novels about children.

“I did find one UR where he and Richie started a band,” Mike says.

“What,” Bev says flatly.

“Yeah,” Mike says. “It’s called Shark Puppy.”

Bev repeats, “*What*.”

“That’s not why I’m not telling Richie and Eddie about this right now, but we both know there’s a nonzero chance Richie would decide to start a band if I told him there was an alternate reality where that happened, right?” Mike asks dryly.

“Absolutely,” Bev says.

“And that’s not all,” Mike says. There’s a kind of ravenous excitement in his eyes. “There are URs where Bill draws comics, and URs where, Bev, you’re the writer, or Ben, you’re the writer.”

Ben doesn’t know what his face does, but he’s glad he’s in the UR that doesn’t require him to be good with his words.

“So when you say *research*,” Ben says slowly.

Mike turns his head slightly to look at him. Beyond his profile, Ben can see Bev’s wide eyes, can watch her glance from Mike’s face to the Kindle screen.

“So say you have Schrödinger’s cat,” he says.

Ben nods.

“But you never open the box.”

So they’re back to the quantum superposition. The impossibility of reality. *You are dead or you aren’t, but we know better.* And, somewhere, Bev dreaming of worlds rolled up like bolts of cloth, and Stan seeing bird wings. Starlings.

Choked on a galaxy.

“How do you know whether the cat’s alive or dead?”

Mike’s tone isn’t challenging, not like he’s walking them through a thought experiment step by step and waiting to make his point. He genuinely seems to want their best educated guess. Ben thinks of the children’s library in Derry, of the storyteller reading *Billy Goat’s Gruff* to the assembled crowd of kids meant to be safe from the child-killer (*child-eater*) on the loose just by gathering them all there on that puzzle-patterned rug. Hooves tapping on a wooden bridge, with no idea what trolls lurk below in the water.

“Is it a question of whether history takes notice of you at all?” Bev asks.

Mike turns his head to look at her and Ben closes his eyes. There are pieces here somewhere, and he has to look them all over to figure out

where they fit. Where Mike has found the join, where the pieces will dovetail.

If he closes his eyes, he thinks about a dark box—a hole in the ground, shored up with lumber he collected out of the junkyard and cut using tools stolen from Bill’s dad’s workshop. A house, where someone small (someone *big*) could hide from the world without ever being seen. *How do you know whether the cat’s alive or dead?* Bullies, pacing over the sod-covered roof without ever noticing the hollow thump of their engineer boots on the piled earth. (Ben, clomping through a cavern chamber in his engineer boots, unable to be sure he found what he was looking for.) As an adult Ben and Richie were too tall to stand upright in the clubhouse; he remembers Richie hovering directly under the trapdoor after Ben broke through it, and Mike didn’t even try to rise to his full height.

He covers his mouth with his hands, thinking, and opens his eyes to look at Beverly. Does history take notice of you at all? In order to decide whether you’re alive or dead, do you have to be noticed? No one looked at Ben in decades, until Bev made confused eye contact with him in the parking lot outside the Jade of the Orient. Sure, they looked *to* him, for approval, for collaboration. No one ever looked at him and saw what was there—whether he was alive or dead. Even his mother always had a filter over her eyes.

“Sometimes,” Mike agrees, though Beverly’s response wasn’t quite an answer. The thing they did—Derry will never know, if there’s ever a Derry again. Maine will never know what caused that apocalyptic rainfall, what flooded out that city, what ripped the roofs off of the department store buildings and dragged Paul Bunyan into the Kenduskeag. The parents of the dead children will never know what happened or who put a stop to it.

If It is at the bottom of the ocean—a box, water so thick it’s opaque, where none of them will ever see It, and by the time the poison goes off they might all be dead anyway—is It alive and dead? Do they have to assume one or the other? Can they live with the consequences of being wrong? Is a quantum superposition any more or less objectionable than an alien clown that devours frightened children?

“Mike, I’m not following you, man,” Ben says with all the love in his heart. His head is spinning a little bit. Who’s dead? Is he dead? Is It dead? Are they all dead? And then, belying his own statement, the answer comes to him: “We’re the cat.”

“We’re the cat,” Mike says. There’s an intensity in his eyes, dark as the cosmos, that frightens Ben somehow. “When you’re in it, you’re in it.”

And the earth is pouring in on him. When he’s in it, he’s in it. At the end of it all, he’s still just—*after all those sit-ups*—still just Ben Hanscom—*what’s your son’s name?*—still just a fat boy. Trapped in a locker too small for him, alone. Trapped in a clubhouse collapsing in on himself.

“And there are over ten million worlds where we lived?” he asks.

“There are over ten million worlds,” Mike allows. “And in a lot of them we live. Which, when you consider the odds...?”

“What’s a lot?” Bev asks.

Mike shrugs. “I have no idea. I think I literally cannot comprehend, after a certain number. And—some of them we die. Some of them, Bill never writes anything again after 2016, or after 1985, whenever we go fight it. I think sometimes we die—you gotta, sometime, you can’t win every time. But in this UR...”

“Some of us,” Ben says. You can’t win every time. Can’t call every childhood friend home. Some of them won, and one of them died.

“I think that’s why we’re dreaming of things that never happened,” Mike says. “I think—Bev, I think that’s why you’ve been dreaming. I think that the deadlights, somehow—”

Bev twitches and then stills.

“Bev?” Ben asks.

She shakes her head. “What are the odds, Mike?”

Mike lowers his gaze to the Kindle. Ben isn’t sure what to do with the

sudden, almost ashamed look on his face.

“It’s called quantum immortality,” he says. “And again, I’m not a physicist or a philosopher or... the people who understand these things. But if the cat gets to live or die, and the poison is meant to be released we don’t know when. Then every time the poison is released, that’s a split. One time where the cat dies, and one time where the cat lives. And that... continues. So the odds are... vanishingly small. Zeno’s paradox small. Every time you run it the odds get smaller, and every time you run it, there’s one world in which the cat lives. No matter how long you run it. For all time. The cat lives, at least once. One against all the URs that ever were.”

“What does that mean for us?” Bev asks. Her voice is barely above a whisper.

But Ben can see it. He’s here in a hotel room with the love of his life and with a friend he forgot he even had. Even when he thought he was alone, he wasn’t. Someone remembered him. Even when he thought he’d been lonely his whole life, he wasn’t. He carried Beverly’s name like a talisman in his pocket. He carried her name in his mouth for years and had no idea.

“Means that Losers really have nothing to lose,” Ben says. “Even when we lose... we win, at least once.”

“At least once,” Mike says. “And based on what we’ve lived through since we did that—once is all we need. I think the Turtle’s alive, for what it’s worth. Alive and dead, but somewhere it’s alive.”

“And somewhere Stan’s alive,” Bev says.

“Yeah.” The Kindle blinked off at some point in their conversation. Mike puts a hand to one eye and covers it; the other closes. Ben realizes with startling abruptness that Mike is near tears. “And somewhere there’s a world without It at all, and we grew up together and never forgot each other—” But Mike never forgot any of them. Mike kept the watch, kept the home fires burning for them. Everything Ben always feared, Mike lived it.

He hugs Mike tightly. He has no idea what else to do except try to

alleviate some of that pain with his presence. Mere moments later Bev folds her arms around Mike's shoulders and her hair falls like a curtain.

"If you're gonna gaze long into the abyss," he says; his voice cracks low. "Be careful, all right, Mikey?"

If Mike has just been given access to ten million worlds' worth of books, it's miraculous that he came out to Los Angeles at all. Ben saw a little bit of how he was living in Derry, up in the loft over the library. Ben thinks he's going to think of that round window for the rest of his life. He's slotting bookshelves into place on guest room walls he hasn't built yet, but he knows there has to be sunlight, there has to be wide windows and no crossbeams.

"Stan said we'd see more things like It from now on," Mike says. His words come out thick and he clears his throat. "And I guess that happens, when you know that things like It exist and you have all the ground in the world to cover."

"God, are you really going to become a monster hunter?" Bev asks.

Mike laughs, the sound slightly wet. "Depends on what needs doing."

"You deserve a rest," Ben says.

"Man, I know I deserve a rest, I'm on vacation." He lifts the Kindle and gestures with it. "I'mma do all the national parks, once I get the money. Hike the Grand Canyon. Go test my luck at the Yellowstone caldera, sit in one of the natural hot springs."

"That sounds good," Bev agrees.

Mike never got the cross-country road trip, and of all of them he probably needed it the most. One without gory sound systems or sudden and startling darkness, or the apocalyptic rainfall.

Come home means such bad things now, four-letter words laden with meaning and blood and violence. But there's good alongside the bad as well, as in all things. A year where you meet the best friends you'll ever have; a year where you're terrified beyond what your mind can hold. You remember a man just in time to grieve him; you remember

that you love someone without truly understanding who they are, and then you get to learn.

“You can always come stay with us,” Ben says. “If you ever get tired, you know.”

Mike just smiles. “I know.”

15. Out with the Old

Summary for the Chapter:

Bev and Richie consider all their options. The Losers Club welcomes the year 2017.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh my *God* you would not believe what I had to do to get this chapter out. It involved half a bottle of blackberry whiskey. It was not good whiskey. But we hit 21 pages so I think I'm going to have to add a chapter to the overall count, and I'm going *insane*. Please accept background Richie/Eddie shenanigans as my apology.

Content warnings: uh, discussions of murder? Lots of drinking? There is so much drinking in this chapter. Mentions of canonical violence. The omnipresent threat of an abusive husband. Mike is surrounded by couples.

At two in the morning somewhere between Christmas and New Year's Eve, Bev and Richie get papped.

They're at a Mexican restaurant, drinking Coronas with lime wedges. Bev is in a corner up on a vinyl bench, and Richie is on the barstool directly opposite her, mostly eclipsing her by virtue of being both tall and loud. Bev's all right with this arrangement, because it means that every time they need more beer or more nachos, she's able to send him off to fetch things for her. She didn't know this was something she wanted in her life, but she's learned a lot about herself since Derry. And also bartenders notice the man over six feet tall in exactly the way they don't notice Beverly.

Also both of them are a little bit traumatized for a lot of reasons, but it turns out that Chinese food is one of the things that upsets them. They had to leave a dim sum place. Just the lighting had them grabbing each other's hands and walking back into the parking lot.

So, Mexican, at this place that Richie swears by. It's not that a lack of demonic fortune cookies is the kind of bar she wants to be setting here. But Richie's almost confident in his space, here, and Bev feels chill in a way that she hasn't for a while. Like something is quieting down in her chest.

"So," Richie says, and sets his beer down. "What's the deal with Haystack calling me from jail?"

Bev puts the heel of her left hand over her orbital socket to stave off an oncoming headache. "God, that was such a bad day."

"Really?" Richie makes his eyes huge behind his glasses and picks his beer up again. "Because you sounded like you were having such a great time on the phone. And you looked so happy in the photos."

Oh god, he looked at the photos.

"I don't know." Bev shakes her head. "It's not like... There weren't a whole lot of things he could have done right there. I didn't think that was going to happen, or I wouldn't have *antagonized* Tom—"

Richie sets his bottle down harder than necessary. Both of them immediately look at it—Bev has a vague memory of Richie trying to smash a bottle and make a weapon, and she has no reason to believe that this will be any more successful.

Once they've established that the bottle is going to remain intact, Richie looks up at her. "Fucking *what*, Beverly?"

The full name has a weird effect. If he called her *Bevvy* she would leave. As it is Bev feels like a spotlight has turned on directly over her head.

"No, no, I was pushing him," she says. "I was absolutely pushing him, I knew I was doing it, I wanted to do it, I told Ben to wait up so I could—" She shakes her head and swigs her beer. The folded wedge of lime brushes against her teeth and she sets the bottle down again. She doesn't know how to explain it to someone outside of herself—how it felt to have Tom in her sightlines and know she could just *end him*.

It's not a feeling she was accustomed to in her marriage. Part of her wants to hang onto it; part of her hates how she clutches at that memory with both hands.

"Hey, uh, quick question." He taps the lip of his bottle against his chin twice, contemplative. Then he asks, "What do you think you'd have to do to me before I came after you like that?"

"Richie."

"No, no, I mean, in your, like, your mental Rolodex of how far you have to push anyone before they forget we live in a fucking society. Like, how much emotional needling before I just completely lose it, huh? Since that's the magical fucking power you have—"

"Beep beep," Bev says.

He points at her. "No. No. I love you and I'm ignoring the beep beep."

"You can't ignore the beep beep."

"I'm ignoring it. For the greater good. Which is—what the *fuck* do you have to do to a man who punched you in the face before you can call it even? Huh?"

He doesn't know. He has an idea, but he doesn't know. Tom hardly ever hit her in the face, but she's thinking about that *stupid belt*, like a dead snake in her hand, the way it felt to wind up with her arm and let it sail forward.

"Stop."

"Because I got the *shit* kicked out of me multiple times when I was a kid, and I—"

"Oh, absolutely not," Bev says. They're a little drunk in a Mexican restaurant, but Bev hasn't forgotten the *ordeal* that was *Penobscot County v. Richard Tozier*, and if he's about to bring up overdue revenge.

"I'm not over it," Richie says. Bev stares across the basket of nachos

at him; it's weirdly honest for Trashmouth, and they haven't even had that much to drink. "I'm not. I'm not, and what happened to me was—"

"Was what, Richie?" she demands, her tone flat. "Are we gonna play that game?"

"What's the game?"

The *comparing your trauma* game. "Are we gonna play that game?"

He rolls his eyes at her. "What's the name of the game?"

She falls silent.

In the quiet, Richie drums on the table and sings, "*What's the name of the game?*"

"Richie."

"*Did it mean anything... to you?*"

She glares at him. "Give me your beer. You owe me one additional beer for making me listen to this."

He gives her a long look and then says, "Yeah, that's fair enough." He passes his bottle across the table and she drinks from it. Richie watches her for a long moment—long enough that if it were anyone else she'd get uncomfortable, but there's a kind of resignation in his eyes instead of interest.

"Are you happy?" he asks.

Bev chokes.

Richie, in a surprising act of civilization, picks a napkin and holds it out to her. "Whoa, you okay?"

She coughs, wipes her mouth, and then blows her nose into the napkin. "With Ben?" she asks.

"No, with Simon Cowell—yes, with Ben, Christ." He reaches across

the table and takes his beer back. “How much snot is in this now, percentage wise?”

Bev rolls her eyes and turns her bottle so that the condensation creates a straight line on the table. When she thumbs the fog away the beer shows gold through the glass.

“I don’t think I get to be happy yet,” she says.

If it were possible for Richie to look even less impressed, he’s attempting it now. “Bull fucking shit, Marsh,” he says.

She flips him off.

“I love you,” he mumbles, almost inaudible under the hum of the late-night chatter in the restaurant, but she can read his lips. Then he shakes his head. “What the fuck do you mean, *get to be happy?*”

Bev rolls her eyes.

“No no no, what happens when you get to be happy? How do you know when you’ve made it?”

“I want to kill my husband,” she says.

And that.

She didn’t mean to say that.

She didn’t mean to mean it, either, but. That’s not the bottom of her wanting. Tom being dead would be—convenient, in some ways, but she’s past that. She’s tired of him, she wants him to go away in the way that her father’s gone away, except in the way he lives in the back of her head. She wants to run—to load up her old Cutlass and sneak away in the middle of the night. She’s too old for this feeling, but it bubbles up in her sometimes.

Now she doesn’t have much reason to try to crush it back down. If she went to Ben and said *Take me somewhere* he’d pick up their suitcases and load the car and they could decide their destination at the airport.

Richie's eyebrows go up. "Oh," he says. He glances from side to side, like checking if the coast is clear, and then he asks, "Like, *tonight*?"

They're not doing this. Richie has killed one person and he managed not to go to jail for the rest of forever. Murder is not a viable solution to Bev's problems.

"No, Richie, not like *tonight*, I didn't mean to say that."

"You didn't mean to say that," Richie says.

"I didn't."

"But did you *mean it*?" he asks.

"No," Bev lies. "No, no, absolutely not, that's not... not actually something I want, I don't know why I said it."

"In the same way that, like, we don't know why we did any of the things we did when we were kids, or...?"

"No, I mean." She doesn't know what she means. She doesn't know anything. She sighs and eats a handful of nachos.

"Because—" Richie shrugs. "You're a little high-profile now, but we already know a criminal defense lawyer. And he's only asked us to never call him again that one time. And I *think* he thought Mike was hot, so we should definitely work that angle."

"Mike is hot," Bev points out reasonably, because she has eyes. "But I don't know what Deaver thought of any of us."

Richie grins. "Oh, I have some ideas."

"Don't tell me your ideas."

"They're good ideas. I can tell Haystack some of them if it's *happy* you need help with."

If he's bringing up sex he's giving her an opportunity to be audacious and confident and also to get out of this line of conversation. Normally Richie buckles pretty fast if you just call his bluff, but Bev

doesn't have the energy for that. "I don't... I don't..." She closes her eyes. "It's not him, you know?"

"I don't know. I don't know. You should probably tell me extremely graphic details about how he is in bed."

"You're taken."

"I—" Richie burst out laughing. "I am. Yeah." And he looks like a kid when he smiles. His teeth are the same.

"Are you happy?" she asks him soberly.

He points at her. "You're not getting out of this."

"Oh, I'm not?"

"No, we're gonna—" He puts a hand to his mouth and pauses for a moment before he course-corrects. "—we're gonna go out and commit manslaughter like two friends who are happy in their current relationships."

"We're not gonna do that." She shakes her head at him.

"We are."

"We're not gonna do that, I don't know why I said that. All I meant, was..." She shrugs and reaches for the nachos. Richie yanks the basket out of her reach and she rolls her eyes. "...I feel like I can't... can't start over, until all of this is done with. Do you know what that feels like?"

There is a long moment where Richie stares at her, evidently nonplussed.

"Thanks, Richie, glad we had this talk."

"No no no!" He puts up both hands. "No, like—you made an effort to... to like, grow up."

"I did not grow up."

“Yeah, but you made an effort, I mean, like, look at me.”

“No, I just mean—like, all the pieces are together, it’s just the time and the place, and then—” She gestures uselessly.

Richie’s eyebrows go up even further.

She sighs. “What.”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“No, *what*.”

“I just mean—oh, you’re talking like *getting married* and shit.”

She stares at him. “When did I say any of that?”

Richie waves at her. “You said it with your eyes.”

“I did not.”

“Okay, maybe Ben said it with his big soulful eyes, whatever.” Richie shrugs. “You could literally go home and say the word—”

God, she was just thinking the same thing. Not about marriage—not that she’s *opposed* to marriage, but she needs to finish one before she can start making plans for another.

She says, “No, I just mean, I have all this stuff I have to get out of the way, before we can...”

He stares at her. “Elope together off to a log cabin he built with his own two hands?”

“No.”

“Bareback?”

She laughs despite herself. “Also no.”

“Okay, Ms. *I want to run towards something*,” Richie says in a voice that she almost doesn’t recognize, until she realizes it’s her own from twenty-seven years ago. “Aside from the absence of media scrutiny—

which, like, let me loan you Eddie, I *love* watching him deal with cameras—what is happy? And when do you get it? And not, like—the *obvious* way that involves literally handcuffing Ben to a bedframe he carved out of the trunk of a living tree.”

Bev squints at him. “Is that—is that *The Odyssey*? ”

“What?”

“Did you just reference *The Odyssey*? ”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Richie says, and she can’t tell whether he’s lying or not. Maybe Richie’s drunk enough to accidentally quote Homer. She has no idea.

She grabs two nachos and mutters, “I don’t need to handcuff him, he stays where I put him.”

Richie chokes on his beer and coughs into his sleeve. “I fucking love you, Marsh,” he repeats.

She chews her nachos as she thinks over her answer. “You know how you used to think about getting away from Derry? ”

“Yeah.”

“And there was—” She gestures to either side, indicating walls. “—all of this concrete stuff around you—all the things you knew you didn’t want, and then the whole—no pattern, no plan out ahead? And you wanted that, but you had no idea what you were gonna do when you got there? ”

Richie wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and nods.

“That’s what it feels like,” she says. “Like the run up to the cliff, and then—” She spreads both hands out.

Richie stares at her. “And then *Consider the Lemming*? ”

“Well how do you feel right now? ”

“I’m workshopping a special, I’m in hell,” Richie replies, and then

shakes his head. “No, no. I know how it is. You’re like, out in public and feeling like a saber-tooth tiger walking through a shopping galleria with a bag from the Teavana in your mouth, like—” He puts both hands in front of his face and mimes gnawing.

Bev shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s a universal experience.”

“You’ve *never* felt like an Ice Age land predator in a strip mall?”

“Do I have to be in the strip mall for the feeling, or is the—”

“No, no, the strip mall is part of the feeling, the tiger is in the strip mall, you’re, like, in a Starbucks in a town you’ve never been to before and there’s a tiny Chinese man eating oatmeal he brought from home in the corner—”

“What—?”

“—yeah, and he’s glaring at you, and outside pigeons are just circling like in *The Birds*, so you try to step outside with your bagel and then they just—” He mimes a flock of birds stealing a baked good right out of his hands. Bev has to brace both elbows on the table and stifle her laughter into her sleeve. He looks back up at her as though for approval. “Like that? That emotional state?”

Mouth covered, she nods at him. “Yeah, that exactly. You got it.”

Richie puts on a parody of smugness and drinks more beer.

“Question: is that part of the special you’re workshopping, because if so, what the *fuck*? ”

“Oh, absolutely not,” he says. “You think I’m gonna give you jokes I’ve worked on? Please, you get the fresh, unpasteurized, raw comedy I’m not allowed to peddle without a license.”

“Is that how you get salmonella?”

“It is. It’s why Eddie won’t let me talk in the apartment anymore, actually.”

Bev points at him. “Before I forget—what’s Eddie’s karaoke song?”

Richie's eyes widen and he grins in something like disbelief. "He told you about that?"

"He said you've been to two karaoke bars and he was hammered."

He's only three beers in but he's flushed with laughing. "Is that all he said?"

"Why, what else happened?" Richie's starting to double over in silent guffaws. "Oh god, do I want to know?"

He might actually start crying with laughter. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She puts both hands down on the table, feeling herself grin back at him. "You're gonna wave that in front of me?"

He just nods.

"What are we, twelve?"

"Thirteen. We never grew up," he manages.

And it's true, in a way. He's still the boy who told her that his yo-yo was broken and he was going to return it and demand a refund, and then who took her to the movies on her first date. Ben was there for that too, actually. But he's not the way he was when they walked into the Jade of the Orient back in September. This is not Richie doing a caricature of happiness and success—this is the Richie who threw himself down on the sidewalk in front of her and screamed *Yes, a date, I shall bloody kill meself if you say no, wot wot*. Something genuine under the veneer, instead of all the gilt paint.

Well, Bev's all right with that. She'd rather be the girl with the slingshot than the woman with the bruises, when she can be.

Richie wipes at his eyes. "Kate Bush. 'Running Up That Hill.'"

"Of course it is," Bev says. "You know I'm gonna assume you did something incredibly graphic at a karaoke bar if you don't tell me what it is."

He snorts. “Oh yeah, a couple of middle-aged men, me with my back, we’re gearing up for the X Games. The Triple-X Games. I don’t know what you’re picturing, but just make sure it’s not anything athletic, all right? Don’t let your imagination completely blind you to what I’m working with here.”

She wrinkles her nose and twists her face away. “Ugh.”

“*Ugh, but not a beep,*” Richie says. “What’s Haystack’s karaoke song?”

“We haven’t done karaoke,” Bev says. She hopes it’s New Kids on the Block.

“What’s yours?”

“Tracy Chapman.”

“Oh, of course, of course. ‘Fast Car’?”

Bev shakes her head. “‘If Not Now...’”

“You wanna go for karaoke while you’re here, just tell me. I’ll get Eddie through the door, no questions asked, for the low low price of *someone* doing a body shot off of Ben Hanscom, I don’t fucking care who, I just wanna see it.”

“I don’t think he’ll go for that.”

“Depends on how many regular shots he’s had before that,” Richie says. “Trust me, everyone has a threshold.”

“Maybe I don’t feel like sharing.”

“Honestly, yeah, get that shit locked down,” Richie says.

She smirks at him. “Commitment’s not really your brand, is it?”

Richie leans back before he remembers he’s on a tall stool and not a chair, and he has to catch himself on the wall. “Dude, fuck my brand. Fuck that guy. With the glasses? Fuck him. I’m all in. Eddie—he knows.” He shrugs and shakes his head like there’s nothing more to

it.

Bev raises her eyebrows at him. “Yeah?” All of it? How much does Eddie know? Bev has some ideas based on the things they talked about last time, the deadlights and all of it, but if Richie was foreseeing all of their deaths she can’t imagine him keeping that to himself. It had to be Eddie for Richie to clam up like that.

“He knows,” Richie repeats, and then gestures to the basket in front of them. “Come on, eat these nachos, if I gulp the whole thing I’m gonna throw up and you’re too short to hold my hair back.”

With that appetizing image in mind, Bev takes more nachos. “You need a haircut,” she tells him.

“This is how long it has to be for it to weigh itself down,” Richie says.

She grins at him. “Do you still have—?” She gestures over her own head, miming the curls he had when he was a kid.

“Yes, okay, they’re retreating but they’re still present.” He rubs at his hairline. “I don’t care how out I am, I’m never going to be *owning a straight iron* out.”

Bev says, “You are a sad, strange little man, and you have my pity.”

“We should have gone to college together,” Richie says. “We would have had the best fucking time, I would have flunked out, it would have been great. Can you move to Los Angeles?”

“I get sunburns in the dark,” Bev says. “Why would I move to Los Angeles?”

He lifts his chin and puts both hands under his face and mugs for her.

That’s what he’s doing in the tabloids in the morning. The headline is: *Bev Marsh’s New Funnyman?* Eddie buys the *National Inquirer* and hangs it on the fridge.

“Rude,” Richie says, scrutinizing his own face. “I have literally always been your funnyman. I’m a very old funnyman. Like, from the block.”

Bev just asks him not to make any public statements about it until her divorce is finalized.

They hole up in Richie and Eddie's apartment on New Year's Eve.

Bill texts to wish them a happy new year, but he's a full eight hours ahead of them, so his text comes in at four in the afternoon.

"That's just like Denbrough, texting from the future," Mike observes out loud. Then he gets a very weird look on his face. Ben automatically checks the apartment for where Mike left his professor bag. He just knows Mike brought the pink Kindle with him.

"Don't get any ideas, man," Ben tells him. "Time travel is one problem we don't need right now." He hands Richie a bottle of champagne.

"Thank you, Haystack, most valuable party attendee as al—hey," Richie says, interrupting himself, and he puts his hand on the lapel of Ben's coat.

Ben blinks at him. "Hello, Richie."

Richie does not move. Ben looks down a couple of times, trying to see if Richie's going to move his hand off Ben's chest. Then he looks to Bev. Bev shrugs.

"It's, uh—it's just champagne, Richie." He looks back down at the hand on his lapel, and then back up. "Uh, Eddie?"

Eddie, who is wearing an apron and two oven mitts, has a distinctly harassed look on his face as he lifts his head from his baking sheet. "He likes your coat," Eddie says shortly, like he's Richie's translator, and then resumes turning tiny hors d'oeuvres over with a pair of tongs.

"Are you sure that's all he likes?" Bev asks, as Ben flushes and shoves Richie's hand off his chest.

"That's all he'd better like," says Eddie without looking up.

Mike lets out a loud “*Ha!*” and plucks the champagne bottle out of Richie’s other hand. “Saying time travel is one problem we don’t need *right now* is like saying that *regular travel* is one thing we don’t need *anywhere.*”

Richie looks around and jabs a thumb in Mike’s direction. “Did Mike —did Mike figure out time travel?”

Ben has bigger problems. “Tell me it’s the coat.”

“It’s a nice coat, I saw the lining last night—”

“Damn right it’s a nice coat,” Bev says. It was a Christmas present from her—it’s navy wool with a red silk lining.

“Well who do I have to fuck around here to get a coat like that?”

There is a pause, and then the sound of muffled laughter. Ben looks over Richie’s shoulder and sees that Eddie has keeled over and is giggling almost hysterically into the countertop, his tongs pointing toward the ceiling.

“Oh, you guys started pregaming early,” Ben realizes. “How old are you?”

Richie points at him. “Forty-one!”

“Uh-huh, and how much have you had to drink?”

Richie points his other hand. “No comment!”

“Okay,” Ben says.

Mike is picking the foil off the bottle of champagne. “Eddie, what are we eating, man?”

Eddie straightens up. “I don’t know. Don’t let me look at the ingredients list.” He hands Bev an empty cardboard box and Bev dutifully begins collapsing it.

Grocery shopping is still an ordeal for Ben. Part of him still hopes for an ally in Eddie, though it’s not fair. It’s not the cleanliness or

potential contamination of the food that worries him, but he feels a little like they've traded neuroses.

"You didn't check when you bought them?" he asks.

Eddie gets a mulish look on his face. "I am trying new things," he says, tone and expression far too grim for such an idealistic statement. "I am sitting with my discomfort, I am trusting my immune system to take care of me, and I am achieving the recommended internal temperature of one hundred sixty-five degrees." He is indeed wielding a turkey thermometer, spearing each of the tiny hors d'oeuvres in turn. Every ten minutes or so he trades another baking sheet for the position in the oven.

Ben struggles in winter, partially because running outdoors is so much less pleasant—one year he slipped on ice on his own running path and completely wiped out—and partially because, while he knows that weight gain during cold is natural, he just can't convince his brain that it's acceptable.

He hangs up his coat on the coat rack and points a threatening finger at Richie. Richie holds up both hands, all *I'm innocent*.

"If it's a coat you want, you've just missed your birthday and Christmas," Bev tells Richie. "You're going to have to wait a whole 'nother year."

She takes her cloche off and shakes out her hair; it curls loosely around her neck, and Ben's seen her scratching at it as though it itches. He holds out his hand for her hat and scarf, and she raises her eyebrows before handing them to him as though surprised.

"Or you could let me see the tag, Haystack," Richie wheedles.

Ben rolls his eyes and waits for Bev to shrug out of her coat. Then he hangs that too.

"Richie—corkscrew?" Mike asks.

"I got it." Richie holds his hand out for the champagne bottle.

Eddie slides open a drawer and produces a corkscrew, which he holds

out to Mike as Richie takes the bottle. “Be careful with that,” he warns.

“Do you think this is the first time I’ve opened a bottle of champagne?” Richie asks.

“That’s gonna hit the ceiling.”

“It’s not gonna hit the ceiling.”

“I know you, and it’s going to hit the ceiling.”

“I hear it’s only champagne if it’s from the Champagne region of France,” Mike offers, voice thick with irony.

“Yeah, otherwise it’s old gay grape juice,” Richie agrees, and yanks the cork out.

It hits the ceiling. Ben ducks automatically—Eddie hisses and tries to cover his baking sheets—and Bev reaches out and snatches the cork out of the air before it can hit Eddie in the head.

“Beverly Marsh, ladies and gentlemen,” Richie says, foam flowing over his hands.

Eddie grabs Richie by the wrist and yanks him over so that the champagne bubbles into the sink instead of onto the floor.

Ben grabs the roll of paper towels. “Actually, why don’t I just...?”

“There are too many people in this kitchen and Richie, you’re at least four of them,” Eddie says.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, you can’t reach the champagne glasses,” Richie replies, opening up cabinets and making Eddie go apoplectic over his sticky hands.

“I’m the reason you even *have* champagne glasses.”

“So I’m going to sit down,” Bev murmurs to Ben. She holds up the hand with the cork in it, pinched between her index finger and thumb, and grins. He wants to kiss her. He sublimates that urge by

pressing his lips to the crown of her head—he loves the smell of her hair—and as she goes into the living room with Mike he rips paper towels off the roll and drops them to the floor where the puddle of champagne suds rests almost at Richie's feet.

"Ben, that's fine, it's really okay," Eddie says apologetically.

"Yeah, I got it," Richie says. "Go sit down. Are you drinking?" He interrupts himself by batting Eddie away from the counter one more time. "And *you*, you go sit down too. What the fuck are you stressed out about? These idiots? Please."

"Guilty as charged," Bev volunteers. She's on the couch with Mike, having slung her legs casually over his lap. Mike pats her knee, smiling contentedly.

"I'm not—I'm not stressed out," Eddie insists. It is a transparent lie.

Awkwardly, Ben lowers his gaze to push the paper towels over the spill.

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm." Richie begins steering Eddie backwards out of the kitchen. Ben steps out of the way, unsure what's happening, and he glances across the room to look at Bev. Bev's just smirking.

"I'm *not* stressed out, *watch my hors d'oeuvres, Richie*—"

"They come frozen out of a box, that's like eighty percent of my diet, you have a timer set up every twenty minutes, we both know my attention span—hey. Hey. Go sit down." Richie stoops, pecks Eddie on the lips, and then freezes like he's just remembered there are other people here.

Ben averts his eyes, mostly just because of the deer-in-the-headlights look Richie got as soon as he realized he was being watched.

Uninhibited, Bev yells, "Whoo!"

Eddie rolls his eyes, flags of color on his cheeks. "It's them, it's fine."

"It's us, it's fine," Mike says.

Richie throws up both hands. He's blushing. Ben did not know that Richie did that. "I'm weird! You're in my home! You all know that I'm weird!"

"You're so weird," Eddie mumbles. "I'm kissing you at midnight, you better start fucking drinking so you can deal with that, we're gonna—" Eddie makes an exasperated sound and storms across the living room to glare out the glass door onto the balcony.

Richie's hands climb higher toward the ceiling. He looks bereft now. "We're gonna *what*?"

Ben folds his hands together and prods at the wet paper towels with the toe of his shoe.

Eddie points at Richie. "*I am stressed out*, pour me a drink." He puts both hands on his hips and resumes glaring outside. His expression abruptly goes blank. In a completely different tone of voice, he says, "There's a lurker in the pool."

Ben's general awkwardness shifts suddenly to complete dread. Like the bottom drops out of his stomach. He doesn't know why. It's December in Los Angeles. He's used to Nebraska weather, but even in the winter it's warm enough to swim here.

Richie asks, "Do you mean like, *in* the pool? With the cameras?"

"When you say *lurker*...?" Mike prompts.

"Is this the thing with the paparazzi you were talking about?" Bev asks.

"He's not *in* the pool, he's in the pool area," Eddie says, his back now to the room at large. "It's like—" He looks down and says, "Ben, what time is it?"

Ben checks his watch. It's not quite ten after eight PM. "Like eight," he replies.

"That pool is closed," Eddie says, his voice tight with disapproval.

"It's—" Richie seems to give up and starts pouring champagne. "It's

New Year's Eve, cut him some slack, maybe he's miserable. Ben." He hands Ben two champagne flutes. "Give one to Eddie before he enacts vigilante justice, would you?"

"I'm not—we signed a rental agreement," Eddie grumbles.

Ben takes the champagne flutes and the offered out for what it is. He walks over, hands Bev one of the drinks, and then takes the other to Eddie. He doesn't know why he's so apprehensive all of a sudden, just crossing the living room, but for some reason he feels like he's dragging millstones on his feet.

Eddie accepts the champagne glass and angrily takes a sip. "There's a fence," he mutters. "It's locked."

Ben takes a deep breath and fishes his phone out of his pocket.

"Ben?" Bev asks.

Ben shakes his head. "It's fine. I'm being paranoid." He pulls up Tom Rogan's Wikipedia page.

"Paranoid about what?" Bev asks, her tone wary.

Eddie glances at what Ben's looking up and pales immediately. His mouth forms an *O* and he glances back out at the pool.

The man standing there is indeed not in the swimming pool. He's inside the wrought-iron fence, with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, staring up at the building.

Eddie whispers, "Are you thinking because of the...?"

Ben nods.

"Okay," Eddie says. "Do you think that's...?"

Ben nods again.

"Okay," Eddie says.

"Ben," Beverly says.

There is no reason that Tom should know which apartment Beverly's in. She doesn't live here. Even if he knows the building Richie lives in, there's no reason for him to know what apartment he lives in. And it's not intuitive, guessing apartment numbers for a building you haven't been in.

But it's dark out, and the lights are on in this room, and if Bev walks in front of this sliding glass door he might spot her.

Ben turns around. "Stay there," he says.

Bev stiffens. Mike glances between them, his hand still resting casually on her knee, his face serious suddenly.

Ben takes a deep breath. "So I think that Tom Rogan might be outside."

Bev's face doesn't change, but she freezes. Her eyes just fix on his face, they don't move. The champagne is still fizzing gently in her glass, and the cork is still between the fingers of her other hand.

Mike sits up slightly. "So what do we need to do?"

Ben's thinking abstractly of Bev's case, of her lawyer, of her protective order. But he already interfered in Bev's case the once. The most important thing is that she's safe.

Part of him would very much like to slide the blinds closed over the sliding glass door and keep her safe and insulated. But Bev's making eye contact with him. Frozen eye contact, but eye contact nonetheless.

Bev closes her eyes. "We don't know it's him," she says.

"No," Ben agrees.

"He doesn't know me," Eddie says. "I can just go out and—be the angry resident and shine a flashlight on him."

"He does that all the time," Richie says from right behind Ben. Ben jumps. "Seriously, he dumped water on the paparazzi back in November, it was the best thing I've ever seen."

“I—” Eddie sighs. “There were extenuating circumstances.”

“Okay,” Mike says. He pats Bev’s knee twice. “What if it is him? Then what?”

Bev takes a deep breath and lifts her champagne glass to her cheek. “Uh, he’s violating the protective order. If he knows I’m here. I don’t know why he would know I’m here, I...”

“It’s me,” Richie says. “No, seriously, if it’s him, this is totally about me, he’s jealous of your old funnyman.”

“Jesus,” Eddie mutters.

“I don’t know if that’s a violation of the protective order,” Bev says. “I—it’s late, I don’t know if I should call Amanda.”

“You can call Amanda,” Ben says. “The worst thing that can happen is she won’t pick up.”

“It’s late. It’s later, in Chicago.”

“She’s probably busy, she can get back to you.”

Bev takes another deep breath. “If it’s a violation of the protective order, we need to get it on record somewhere.”

“Okay,” Ben says.

“Do you want to get the police involved?” Mike asks, looking at Bev.

“I don’t know,” Bev says.

“Okay. Well, before you call the cops, *please* make sure it’s him,” Mike says, which is a good move.

“I’m on it,” says Eddie, and opens the sliding glass door.

Richie says, “Eds—”

Eddie shushes him loudly and makes eye contact while he steps out and then slides the door shut again.

“Oh my god,” says Bev, and drains her champagne glass.

They all watch Eddie walk out to the railing, lift up his champagne glass, and then freeze. Then he turns back around and comes back inside, holding up his glass. “This is not a phone,” he whispers to Ben.

“You’re right,” Richie says, eyes wide and incredulous.

Eddie holds his hand out to Richie. “Where’s my phone?”

“I don’t know, where’s your phone?”

A timer goes off in the kitchen.

“Fuck!” Richie hisses, hands Eddie his phone, and then goes back to the kitchen. “I got it! Go be a hero!”

“I—this—fine!” Eddie hisses, and closes the door again.

“Oh my god,” Bev repeats. “Richie, get me a refill.”

Richie jabs at the timer. “How do you turn this off?” he almost squawks.

Ben watches Eddie go out to the railing. He shakes Richie’s phone twice and the flashlight comes on. Under the beeping of the timer and Richie’s frantic grumbling, they hear Eddie call out, “Everything okay down there?”

Ben holds his breath and turns to look at Bev.

A man’s voice calls back, “Yeah.”

Bev relaxes abruptly and shakes her head.

Ben exhales. “It’s not him?”

“It’s not him,” Bev replies.

Mike slumps into the corner of the couch. “I told you not to get the cops involved.”

“And we listened,” Ben says. He knocks on the sliding glass door. Eddie turns around. Ben shakes his head. Eddie jabs a thumb over his shoulder. Ben opens the door. “It’s not him and Richie can’t turn off the timer,” he says.

“I knew it!” Eddie almost shouts, turning and sloshing champagne as he comes back into the apartment.

Bev hands Mike her champagne glass. “I’m getting up,” she tells him.

Mike lets her go. Bev stands up, gives a faint smile as Eddie struggles with the sliding glass door, and crosses the room. Ben turns and watches her go, not sure what’s happening. She goes over to the bathroom door and closes it behind her. The lock clicks.

Ben blinks and finds that everyone in the room is looking at him. There is a long moment of silence, sliced into segments by the beeping timer.

“Richie, just unscrew the top,” Eddie says.

“Sorry, *unscrewing* things is not my specialty,” Richie says.

The timer abruptly cuts off.

Looking for sanity, Ben slowly turns around and looks at Mike.

Mike shakes his head. “You got this, man.”

Ben does not feel that he’s got this. She locked the door. He gestures at the door handle. If she wanted him to come after her, she could have left the door unlocked.

“The other door is through the bedroom,” Richie says. “It’s a suite. We picked the apartment based on the shower, go admire it.”

“We did—we did *not* pick the apartment based on the shower,” Eddie says.

Mike clears his throat. “Hey, Beverly?”

They all fall silent.

“Yeah?” Bev calls back.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Bev replies.

More silence.

Then Bev asks, “Is Ben doing the thing?”

“Yeah,” Mike says.

Ben frowns. What thing?

The door unlocks and she opens it. Her face is very pale, but her eyes are knowing somehow. “Come on in.”

“Don’t have sex in our shower!” Richie yells after him.

Ben flips him off and closes the door behind him. Then he looks around.

“This is a nice bathroom,” he allows. It’s very modern. The shower looks excessively large. Ben grimaces as he looks at it and then averts his eyes.

Bev laughs a little and looks down at her feet. She’s still wearing her boots. “I’m sorry,” she says.

Ben blinks at her. “For what?”

She shrugs and shakes her head. “I—don’t know what just happened.”

“I panicked,” Ben says. “I just—I got really paranoid out of nowhere.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” he says. “I—” He swallows. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are *you* sorry?”

“Because my problems shouldn’t make things worse for you,” he says.

Bev sighs and puts both hands up. “That’s not—” She rests her palms on Ben’s chest through his shirt, then leans forward and rests her forehead on his collarbone. He puts his arms around her automatically. The small of her back is warm. “How long have we been worrying about my problems?”

“Your problems are actual problems,” Ben says.

“You—” She growls at him. He’s taken aback. “Sorry,” she says. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

That sense of dread comes back. Just knocks him over the back of the head. If she weren’t holding onto him he might sway in place.

“Oh,” Ben says, his voice completely colorless.

She looks up at him, her eyes wide. “Oh,” she says. “No, not *us*, I mean.”

“Oh,” he says in relief. He rests his forehead on the crown of her head. Her hair smells like apricots. He didn’t know that until he saw the little apricot illustration on the bottle of her shampoo, but that’s about the only association he has with apricots now.

“God, I’m sorry,” Bev says. “I’m still... doing *this*. You’re not in question, I love you, I promise. I’m... a little worried by how quickly you just assumed I was dumping you, to be honest, but we can come back to that later.”

“Yeah, I have self-esteem problems, I need to see a counselor for like a lot of reasons,” Ben admits. It has genuinely been on his list of things to do. “What were you saying?”

“That is...” Her hand slides up his back. “...very adult of you. I just. I don’t want to...” She tips her head back slightly and he straightens up to give her room. Her eyes are clear green like rainwater. He’s so in love with her. “I’m forty-one,” she says. “I’m almost forty-two.”

He nods.

“And I want to start my life over.”

He nods again, slower this time, waiting for details.

She holds onto the front of his shirt, her hands on either side of the row of buttons. “You’re part of it. The starting over.”

He smiles; he’s happy to be included.

“I want to be done with him,” she says. “I’ve decided. I made up my mind.”

“Okay,” he says.

“That’s my New Year’s resolution.”

“Okay.”

Bev stares at him. She’s still very pale, especially under her eyes, but she’s flushing up her throat and jaw. He can see it where her head’s tipped back.

“It’s like eight at night,” she says.

“Uh—” Ben lifts his watch up. “Yeah, eight-thirty.”

“I’m kissing you anyway.”

“Uh, that’s cool,” he says. “There’s no rule that you have to wait until midnight.” He leans down and kisses her. Her hands run down the front of his shirt to his stomach and he shivers, breaking apart to say, “But we really can’t have sex in this bathroom, I do not think Richie will ever let that go.”

Bev puts her forehead on his chest again and laughs.

Later, she makes him eat hors d’oeuvres before he drinks champagne. She’s right that he shouldn’t be drinking so much on an empty stomach—yet another thing he probably needs to talk to a counselor about—and at one point she puts a mini egg roll directly in his mouth. Richie makes a revolted noise and waves a hand towel at them like he’s threatening to smother them or something.

Ben kisses Bev at midnight.

(But you knew they would.)

Somewhere, in the background, Mike makes a joke about being the fifth wheel. Ben barely hears it. He doesn't think he has a New Year's resolution. He thinks he's understanding the phrase *new lease on life* in a way he never thought he would.

"So what do we think the creeper in the pool is doing?" Richie asks. He's almost upside-down in his chair, in a way that adult humans definitely do not sit. "Like, is he a regular serial killer, or—?"

"Jesus Christ," says Eddie. He's definitely consumed about half the bottle of champagne, and he grabs Richie by the hair and kisses him upside-down like Spiderman. Richie's glasses fall on the floor.

Bev whoops again.

Richie flips her off and drags Eddie into the chair with him.

The thought *I'm never going to be lonely again* hits Ben so hard in the gut that he almost buckles. He blinks and looks down at Bev's profile, her stubborn chin. There she is.

She turns to look at him. "What?"

Ben shakes his head. "I love you," he manages.

She smiles. "I love you too," she whispers back, and kisses him once, just quickly.

Mike says, "Christ, Richie, let the man breathe."

There is a wet smacking sound. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck me, fuck all of you, get out of my house," Richie says.

"This is not a house," Ben says.

"My point stands."

"I'm finishing the champagne," Mike says. "And the little egg roll things. It's the single tax. Price I pay for putting up with y'all in any universe."

They let him have it.

16. Out in the World

Summary for the Chapter:

Bev makes a couple choices. Ben submits to being known.

Notes for the Chapter:

Why did this chapter come so much easier than the last one? This next one is going to be the epilogue, guys. I don't think it'll be in quite the same style as Eddie Lives, but I'm looking forward to it anyway.

Content warnings for this chapter: mentions of domestic abuse (Tom Rogan), Stan Uris is not okay, explicit sexual content. Ben and Bev are really fluffy. Bill Denbrough is a horror writer and sometimes says deeply upsetting things, but that's not his fault. I don't know when the Netflix reboot of *Queer Eye* was released but I'm not going to look it up, I'm taking a nap instead. The end is in sight, people!

The offer comes from Coach.

It's lower than similar offers they've received before. Bev tells Marianne that as soon as she shows her the inquiry. As she sits in one of the wingback chairs in Marianne's office she feels like her head is spinning.

"It's more than the value the court determined for the label," Marianne says. "You'd still be making a profit."

Making a profit isn't Bev's biggest concern. She doesn't know why she brought it up. Something to say.

"Beverly."

Bev looks up at Marianne. Marianne walked Kay through her divorce, all those years ago; Kay still sends Marianne Christmas cards.

“Is this what you want?” Marianne asks.

There’s a scared-little-girl part of her that wants to call Ben, call Kay, call someone to ask for approval. A second opinion. Someone older and wiser than her. Bev has done very little with the financial side of the business since they founded the label—she’s the creative powerhouse. She puts on the shows for the buyers and Tom does the negotiations.

What makes her even think she could start a new independent label without someone to do that for her? Mike is still speculative about whether or not the Losers will enjoy the same success they previously have, now that It’s gone, now that the Turtle is... wherever the Turtle is. Whatever the Turtle is. A strange but familiar man warning her about choking hazards in dreams, rolling cloth back up into bolts.

Bev takes a deep breath. “Yes,” she says. “This is what I want.”

“Okay,” Marianne says. “Let me make this happen for you.”

The best part of it is that Coach will be giving Bev the money. Not Tom. She doesn’t have to take anything from his hand ever again—not a belt, not a check that still has her name on the upper left-hand corner, none of her documents that Amanda handed her once Tom was forced to surrender them in discovery. Bev has her birth certificate back, her passport back. She has her new bank account in her name only.

Let me make this happen for you. It’s a relief, after scrabbling so long, to hear that.

Ben Cross drops her off at the hotel at one in the afternoon. It’s not a court day, just a meeting day. There will be a couple more court appearances, as the judge decides whether this is something he wants to proceed with, but this is a solution that Tom can’t say no to. He can’t drag out this process any further, he can’t keep stringing Bev along. Can’t keep her on the hook, just so she’s never rid of him.

If the judge accepts this as a valid distribution of their marital assets—and Marianne has no reason to believe he won’t—Bev is free.

She comes up to the hotel room and unlocks the door without calling Ben to come meet her. When she opens the door there's a conspicuous silence from within, and then Ben asks, "Beverly?"

"It's me," she says, and hears him sigh in relief.

There's a creak of springs as he gets up from the bed. He comes to the doorway in pajama pants. Bev doesn't even want to think what it's costing him to keep them at this hotel for this long.

"How did it go?" he asks.

She drops her purse on the floor in the hallway and holds up both hands. "Marianne thinks we can do it."

Ben leans sideways into the doorpost. "Oh thank god."

"I want to do the movie thing where we hug and you pick me up," Bev says. "I feel like this is the moment."

He straightens quickly. "Sure, we can do that."

She doesn't quite run at him, but she does throw her arms around him. He lifts her into the air and gets an arm under her thighs without apparent issue, and she squeezes his sides with her knees, but she feels very secure there. He's sturdy, is Ben. She holds his face in both hands and kisses him, letting all her relief pour out of her like it can soak into him.

She rests her forehead against his. "I'm so tired," she says. It's only January eleventh. They were just on vacation. Only now does she feel anything close to the relaxation she's been chasing for weeks.

"We can take a nap," Ben says.

Bev's groan is more overtly sexual than she meant it to be. When she opens her eyes, Ben's blushing a little.

"That's a yes to naps," she says. "I'm old now, let's buy a boat and get a dog and take a lot of naps all the time."

He chuckles; she can feel the vibrations under her hands where she's

holding on to his shoulders. “Okay.”

“You don’t have to buy a boat,” she mumbles. She’s pretty sure she’s heard the phrase *a boat is a hole in the water you throw money into*, and she’s cost Ben a lot of money over the last...

It’s only been since September. The last three months of her life feel endless, and that’s discounting all of the time shenanigans in the Derry Townhouse, which Mike claims were “definitely magical.” She supposes that the odd taffy-pulling sensation of time is what happens when you leave yourself on the backburner for twenty-seven years and then decide to pick up where you left off, all at once.

“I could rent a boat, I’m not attached,” Ben says.

“Do you know how to sail?”

“I do know how to sail.”

She groans again. “*Why* do you know all of these things? You’re a Hallmark romantic lead.” She kisses him before he can answer, and then says, “If we’re going to take a nap I have to wash my face, I’m going to get makeup all over the pillows and I’ll have stress breakouts.”

“Do you want me to put you down?”

The answer is not really.

He carries her into the bathroom and sets her carefully down in front of the sink. She washes her face quickly—he hands her a towel—and then dries and moisturizes carefully. He’s looking expectantly at her.

“Do you want me to carry you to bed?”

Heat lazily uncoils in her gut—not something urgent, not some flash-in-the-pan need, but a promise of something to come later. She really is tired.

“Yes,” she says.

He bites his lip when he smiles. She loves him—loves that smile on

him, loves how he looks like he did when she said his name in the parking lot in Derry, disbelieving. He was always handsome—it was how she recognized him, like the shadow of the face he wears now was always lurking beneath the surface, waiting to come into relief.

“Okay,” he says without question.

He lifts her up without trouble. She holds onto his shoulders and ducks carefully as they pass under the doorframe. He drops back onto the bed without letting her go and she shrieks and laughs. That dip is like a roller coaster—the fun of the rush, the certainty that she’s safe.

“Are you okay?” she asks him, because she did just land on him.

“I’m perfect,” Ben says, and then shakes his head. “That’s not what I—I’m good, I—” He reaches up over his head and folds his laptop shut, then tries to set it down on the floor without dropping it.

She sits up and starts taking off her shoes. “What are you working on?” she asks.

He reddens suddenly. “Uh—nothing, really.”

She pauses, heel in hand, and gives him an odd look before she drops it over the side of the bed.

“I mean—it’s just designs, because I don’t have a lot. You can’t really start designing until you know where the thing’s going to go, otherwise it doesn’t, uh, blend in with the landscape. Like—like dressing someone for an event, without knowing what the event’s going to be.” There’s a certain confidence in this last analogy that isn’t in the rest of his disclaimers. He runs a hand through his hair and it sticks up in spikes.

“For a contract? Or for fun?” Bev asks.

He blushes a little deeper. “Uh, it’s a personal project. Not for a contract. There’s, uh, a very interesting competition coming up soon. A bee research facility? Moriyama and Takashima are applying, but I’ve got... a friend there who let me know.”

Bev flops back onto the pillows and groans as she lets her whole

spine sink into the mattress.

“Feel better?” Ben asks.

“Yes.” Without opening her eyes she starts working her tights off her legs, pulling her skirt off and tossing it in the corner without worrying about wrinkles. “God, you make me feel like a person again.”

“Yeah?”

She opens her eyes. The look he’s giving her is so soft she almost doesn’t know what to do with it.

“Did I just totally interrupt your creative flow?” she asks him.

“No,” he says.

“Because if you’re not tired, you can, like, sit up and keep working on it, I don’t want to derail you if you’re in the zone.” She knows how that feels—the inability to think, to focus on anything except trying to get the concept in her head into something concrete outside of it. Ben always put things together so instinctively when they were younger—he has a calling. Bev doesn’t know about these alternate universes—these *URs* Mike mentioned where they’re writers—but she’s almost certain he knows what being possessed by an idea feels like. Tom used to avoid her, used to close the door on her, almost intimidated by her drive—and that was nice. Good moments, actually, when she felt that she was more than what he thought she was. What will Ben do when the mood hits her?

Aside from make her coffee?

She told Richie she didn’t know what her life was going to be like going forward. The rough shape of *art* fits into it somewhere, becoming more or less defined the more she thinks about it. Boats and dogs and travel and Nebraska. Wide plains, blue sky. Ben’s brown eyes.

“Can I hold you?” Ben asks.

She wants that with a magnitude she hadn’t anticipated until he

offered it. “Please.”

They spoon up next to each other like they’re teenagers. She can feel the point of his nose in her hair.

“Can you breathe?” she asks him.

“Mm-hmm,” he murmurs. One arm loops over her waist. He’s warm. Bev tucks her toes under his legs and focuses on his breathing, trying to match it. It’s a trick that always makes her doze off.

She drifts. She dreams she’s driving a car—not the usual anxiety dreams where suddenly she has to grab the wheel from the passenger seat or from the back, or where Tom is driving them toward a cliff—but she can feel Ben pressed up against her, solid and comforting, and suddenly she’s driving Mike’s truck and he’s half-asleep against her. It’s good.

And then they’re driving some kind of open-top sports car, and Ben’s leaning on her.

“That’s not yours,” Stanley says disapprovingly, and Bev turns around to find him in the backseat. The car fades away behind them.

“What’s not mine?” she asks, nonplussed.

“The memory,” he says, and then shakes his head. He’s in his cardigan again, wearing his reading glasses.

Bev’s head is foggy with comfort and complacence, but the fabric store is fading into focus around them. She can still feel Ben’s warmth against her—hear him sigh in her ear—but she’s aware that she’s sleeping too. She stares at Stan’s face, focusing on it and trying to sink deeper into the dream.

“Quantum immortality,” she says thickly. The words don’t want to come out of her mouth. She can’t turn her head to the side to look at Ben, but that’s fine, she knows he’s there.

Stan nods slowly. “I trapped myself,” he says. He picks idly at one of his buttons; Bev focuses until she can see the thick weave of the sweater. “Not the only universe. Guess that’s part of my pattern, too.”

“Your pattern,” she repeats slowly.

He nods. “Like cloth, I think. I’d call it a formula, but. I don’t think we’re actually talking. I don’t think I’m using real words, I think I’m so deep in your head that... concepts just float to the top, and you translate them back.” He smiles a little. “I wonder if you’ll remember this.”

Bev swallows. “Richie drank so much at New Year’s.”

Stan smiles.

“You never came,” she says. It’s not reproachful, just an observation, but she worries some of her childish disappointment shows through. “I missed you.”

If that’s a concept, let him see it in all its authenticity. The piece of their circle, ripped out where he should be. An empty plate at a table. Bloody hands clasped together, the longing to go back to that sunlit day.

Ben shifts a little in his sleep, his head turning away from hers. She can hear the scratch of his facial hair on the pillow.

Stan takes off his glasses and they vanish somewhere between his hands and the neck of his cardigan. He looks down at them, bemused. “You’re barely asleep,” he says.

“I miss you,” she repeats.

“I know,” Stan says. “I miss you too. I always do.”

“If you’re trapped,” she says slowly, “what do you need?”

“You’re so close,” Stan says. “I need you to get free, Bev. You’re almost there.”

“Is—the deal?” She doesn’t know what she’s asking.

But Stan’s nodding already. “The deal will go through. You’re almost free of him, Bev, I promise. You get to move on.”

“But what do you need?” she asks him.

“The six of you,” Stan says. He shrugs. “It’s all I’ve ever needed. True love, and all that.” He wraps his arms around himself, hands touching his elbows.

Bev wants to reach out to him, but she can’t with how Ben is holding her in place. *Anchoring her*, she thinks abstractly. The dream is so thin it’s transparent, and she doesn’t know what she’d do if she stepped off into that nothingness that Stan’s glasses vanished into. Ben’s arms around her hold her safe, keep her in place.

“I chose you, Bev,” Stan says. “The six of you. True love, everlasting love, forever love. I have to—well, not *live* with that choice. That’s not what I’m doing. But. I thought there’d be another world, I didn’t understand.”

“Stanley,” Bev says.

He smiles. It’s a little thin, a little sad. There was always that faintly ragged edge to him, wasn’t there? He tried to oil it down into place, tried to fold it up in the neat creases of his shirts, the careful part of his hair, creating clear delineations in order and disorder. She’s thinking of him as a child, with the punctures in his face, and then suddenly that’s how he appears before her. He’s wearing a red shirt and his face is bloodied and tear-stained, but he’s smiling.

“Do you want to see something?” he asks her in the voice of a child.

She tries to nod and can’t. Tries to move toward him and can’t. That’s okay, something tells her. Maybe it’s Stanley himself.

“Sure,” she says. They’re best friends. Forever. He can show her anything.

He shows her the cistern.

Shows her Ben’s hands on her cheeks, Ben’s eyes wide open, either Richie or Eddie crying out in something like disgust. She waits for her eyes to open and nothing happens, and then Ben releases her face. He’s wearing a sheepish look, like he had to try it.

And then Bev's chest—she's outside herself, she remembers that old white dress, how she had to burn it after that—expands in a gasp straight out of a horror movie. The zombie coming back to life. The princess resurrected.

“January embers,” says young Bev.

Young Ben smiles back at her. “My heart burns there too,” he replies, his voice high pitched and soft.

And Bev... remembers.

She turns toward Ben and the dream dissolves around her; the hotel room fades back into view, but it's not important. Ben is still lying on the bed beside her, hand resting on her hip now, shoulder pressed tight to hers. She sits up and he frowns, then startles awake.

“What?” he asks.

Bev stares at him. “You didn't set your astronaut timer,” she realizes.

“What?” He blinks at her, confusion slowly fading out of his eyes as they focus. “No, I'm not—that's for when I'm tired, I just wanted to hold you.”

“I realized it was you,” she said. “Back then. You told me you wrote it.”

Ben blinks at her. “What?”

“In the standpipe,” Bev says. “After you kissed me. It was the first thing I said.”

Ben's eyes focus. His eyelids tighten slightly. “Yeah,” he says.

“I was in the deadlights,” she says. “But I knew you were there. And I just—I *knew* you, right then. I felt like...”

She can't clearly remember what she dreamed, but something about a connection based not on words, but on the same transfer of ideas that happens when a thought rises in her mind. Recognizing each other on a level deeper than language, on the level that she knows herself, the

darknesses and the profundities in her mind.

“There were all these horrors,” she says. “And you brought me out. You always brought me out—and I knew you, it was like you were in my head with me, I knew you.”

Slowly Ben raises a hand to her cheek. There’s a faint line of concern between his brows. She becomes aware that her tone is tending towards frantic.

“And I loved you,” she says. “Back then. I knew you, and I loved you.”

It’s important he understands it. No nascent sexual desire, no reflection of her anxieties about the way men and boys looked at her—Beverly recognized Ben Hanscom in 1989 and she knew him, and she loved him in the way that two people who truly understand each other do. She knew that he wrote the poem, knew the way the flap of the mailbox squeaked as he tucked the postcard inside, knew that *he knew* she wouldn’t have any idea he wrote it but it didn’t matter, as long as it made her happy.

“I used to sit in my bathtub and just look at it in and smile,” she says. “That’s how you made me feel.”

“Bev,” Ben says.

She bends and kisses him.

Their mouths taste like sleep but when they trade breath back and forth the sensation fades into the background, into the slide of lips together. She doesn’t know how to tell him that she loved him when she was a pair of eyes staring into swirling lights, that she loved him when he was a presence beside her without a body at all, using what magic he had to bring her back; so she pulls his shirts over his head and runs her hands over his ribs, down to his stomach. She barely even feels his scar. He breathes shakily when she strokes down to his hips, but she looks back up into his face.

“Is this okay?” she whispers.

And instead of *It’s okay* or *Yeah* or *Whatever you want*, he nods and

licks his lips and says, "It's good."

She thumbs just under his navel at the shadow where his hair starts, and his lips twitch. He looks at her looking at him; he doesn't close his eyes. She kisses his forehead, the bridge of his nose, the hollow of his throat; she can see him limned in light with dust motes floating around him. Sunlight out in the quarry.

They make love. There's no other word for it. And she can't see anything except the right here and right now; sex flush on his face, his throat, his shoulders, his hips. She loves him.

"I love you," she tells him, and bites his lip gently. He moans into her mouth and grinds tight into her, all white-hot pressure, and he tenses so hard he shakes before he comes. He's never left a bruise on her but he does manage to pull the sheets off the mattress, and Bev slides one knee up higher along his side and sucks a hickey under his jaw while he brings her off one last time. She doesn't see anything but him—no memory, no vision, no other life.

"Okay?" he asks her, his voice rough when she stops her gentle rocking on him.

She feels almost boneless, shoulder and spine heavy against the mattress. "Very good," she slurs. He's still bashful about it, averting his eyes as he carefully pulls out and ties off the condom. She's cold without him; as soon as he lies back down she twines her legs around his, knowing she's still slick and making a mess. Whatever. They have another bed in the other room.

"I mean it," she says, and kisses the ridge of his eyebrow. He looks back at her, his eyes soft. She smiles. "I know you're usually the one who says *I love you* in bed."

"Well, I do," he murmurs.

"I don't mean to steal your thunder."

"Steal whatever you like," he says, and gestures grandiosely toward the ceiling with his left arm. "I give it to you. Anything you want, it's yours."

She smirks at him.

He grins back at her. “Don’t say it.”

“You do give it to me,” she murmurs.

He laughs into her shoulder.

She slides one hand down his back and finds the jut of his hipbone with her palm. “I’m not saying that’s why I’m here, but it is very convenient.”

He’s still laughing. She loves this intimacy almost as much as the sex. “I do what I can,” he says almost into her throat; she can feel the heat from his face. He swallows—she hears the little click of his throat—and sobers some. “You’re the love of my life, Bev Marsh,” he says almost wistfully.

“Do you know, I think you might be mine.”

Ben takes Fred running in the morning.

They had to go through the track in the woods several times before Fred became familiar with it, and half of that involved Fred leaping through snow up to his chest. There was very little running accomplished until the thaw; it was mostly Fred on the long leash, sniffing around, getting accustomed to the area and to Ben’s schedule. Now he wakes up in the morning, kisses a sleepy Bev on the cheek, puts on his workout clothes, and turns to find Fred waiting expectantly in front of the door to go with him.

He’s definitely Bev’s dog. But Ben doesn’t mind; Bev’s his favorite person, too.

When they come back in from the early morning fog, Ben’s ears stinging and his hands aching with arthritis he doesn’t want to admit to having just yet, he pours water from the pitcher into Fred’s dish. Then he gets cold water for himself and stands sweating in his kitchen, waiting for his heart rate to slow back to resting. Fred sloppily gets a drink—he seems unclear on how to drink from a dish

without slopping half of it over the floor, which makes Ben weep for the hardwood and which drove Bev to name the persistent puddle there “Lake Fred.” On long runs—when Ben’s had a rough night or when he unexpectedly has free time—he sometimes pours from his water bottle directly into his hands, and Fred will drink from the cup he makes of them.

Ben pours breakfast into Fred’s other bowl, then washes his hands and eats his fruit. He does full-scale breakfasts on special events—Bev’s birthday back in February, for example, or that time that Mike came up here for Easter—but he’s still most comfortable with just fruit and cold water in the mornings. Fred eats like he’s starving and then goes back into the bedroom; Ben can tell when Bev starts giggling that Fred’s licking her hands. Sometimes that’s enough to get her up and sometimes it’s not. He doesn’t mind.

They need a stone or tile floor for Fred’s dishes. Maybe a dog door, depending on what kind of fencing they put around the lot. He’s been thinking more and more about designs lately, though he won’t start searching for locations in any seriousness until Bev tells him where she wants to go.

Bev comes out in her pajamas, curls wisping up away from her neck and chin. Fred likes nothing better than being surgically connected to Bev’s side, and he follows her along like a loyal bodyguard. All Bev’s jeans are marked below the knee with brindled brown and black hair. There are lint rollers on every flat surface in the house. Ricky Lee has taken to asking about Fred when they come in on Fridays.

“Morning,” Ben says around a mouthful of cantaloupe.

“Morning,” she replies. She moves toward him without seeming to think about it, stretching up for her kiss almost on autopilot. She hasn’t brushed her teeth, but he also knows she hates melon and she still kisses him when he’s eating it, so they even out somewhere.

“Coffee?” he offers. Sometimes she says no; sometimes she sits up and nurses a cigarette out on the back porch. Sometimes she stays just to watch him eat breakfast and log it in the little app on his phone, and then she goes back to bed. Sometimes she eats toast with marmalade out on the counter. He keeps buying it because he likes watching her

eat it.

“Please.”

He starts the water. If she wants coffee she’s usually awake enough to chat, or she plans on it.

“How awake are you?” he asks.

“Getting there,” she says. “No weird dreams. Just the usual *back in high school, can’t remember where the science classroom is* nonsense.”

The bulletin board of concept sketches is coalescing into something in his study.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he says. “But you might want to think about it a bit, I don’t need an answer right away.”

Fred sits down and makes an inquisitive noise. Bev reaches down and scratches his head as she slouches onto a barstool.

“Okay,” she says.

“What do you need for a workroom?” he asks. “Like, to do your design work and everything?”

Bev sets her chin for a moment, and then she leans forward and puts her head on the countertop, her shoulders slumping. “Oh god.”

Abort mission. Abort.

“Sorry,” Ben says. They’ve been living together for a full six months; he thought he’d made it pretty clear that he’d like to start a life together, and for him, that means a place just for them. He still loves his mother, but the low heights of all his furniture makes him feel like a giant in this space, especially considering that the next tallest living creature is Beverly at five-four. “If you don’t want a study you don’t have to have one, I’ve just been thinking.”

Bev draws in a deep breath and then lifts her head. She’s smiling, her mouth a little slack with something like relief. “I thought you were going to propose.”

Ben chokes on fruit juice. He coughs—he's very worried he's going to have to turn to the sink and spit out his food, which is not exactly something he wants Beverly to watch him do, especially in this moment—and clears his throat enough to say, “Uh.”

Very helpful. Really adding a lot to the conversation.

“I don’t know if—if that’s something you’d—I just want you to have the—” He’s sweating again. His heart rate is not okay. He clears his throat once more. “If I were going to propose, you know I’d take a shower first, right?”

She laughs. “That’s why I was surprised. God, I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t—uh, don’t be.”

Fred grumbles as he lays down on the hardwood. Water boils behind Ben on the counter. He puts a hand down on the edge of the sink and sets his fork down.

“Do you want to get married?” he asks her, and stops himself from tacking *again* on to the end of it.

He’s been very careful this whole time to leave a door open for her, in case she needs to bolt. His therapist, Kathy, raises her eyebrows at him when he says things like that, but Ben still doesn’t want Beverly to feel trapped. And he might not know all the intimate details of what *marriage* means to Beverly, but he has an idea of what it means for him.

She’s it, for him. Always has been. He’ll be New Kid, he’ll be Ben from sosh class, he’ll be the guy she comes home to. She sleeps in his bed, she drinks the coffee he buys for her and looks at him sleepy-eyed (well, not right now, now she looks kind of alert and exhausted) across the kitchen.

“Hypothetically,” he adds after a moment—because if she wants a proposal this is not gonna be it, he’s going to do it right. But he has opinions about the marriage proposal process—if he proposes to her, he could have endless days and weeks and months to decide if he wants to get married, he’s not going to put her on the spot right here

in the kitchen. Before coffee.

Oh god, he forgot about the coffee. What kind of husband would he be?

“Hypothetically?” Bev repeats, her smile and her voice gently teasing.

“Hypothetically,” he says. “Being married. To me.” And he knocks his fruit into the sink.

There’s so much understanding on her face that it hurts. “Do you need to sit down?”

“Probably,” he allows.

Fred whines. Bev scratches his head and gets up. “Okay,” she says, and puts her hands on him to maneuver around him in the kitchen, and he lets her because the clumsy part of him (some thirty years ago, trying to unlock his bike while balancing a model of a tower on his other hand) would probably walk into her. She releases him and goes to pour her coffee and fix it with her three sugars, and Ben sits on the barstool and takes some deep breaths.

“If you wanted to get married, I would do that,” he says.

She glances over her shoulder at him and then lowers her face back to her mug, stirring.

“I mean, I would do the whole thing, I would buy a ring, I could do the whole proposal, I would call Kay and get her blessing.” Kay doesn’t actually hate him but she likes to pretend she does; Ben secretly finds it very funny, especially the time she called his radio tower *a testimony to the glory of the phallus* in an op-ed. “If that’s something you wanted. If it’s not something you wanted, I’m just happy that you’re here.”

She smiles; he sees the swell of her cheek on her profile. She’s so beautiful, heavy-lidded and white and red in the morning. She turns to him and asks, “Ben, what do you want?”

It’s an important question. He can feel it.

“I want to build you a house,” he says honestly.

Her smile widens. He loves her *teeth*. He didn’t think that was the kind of thing he paid attention to, but there’s not a part of Bev Marsh that doesn’t *shine*. She puts an elbow on the countertop and leans back to look at him, mug in hand.

“What’re we gonna do in that house?” she asks, her tone lightly challenging.

It could be an overture, but it’s not. He glances down at the dog. One of Fred’s ears rotates to point toward him, like even the dog can feel how important it is that he choose his words carefully.

“More of this,” he replies honestly. “We’re gonna... wash dishes and drink coffee and watch TV and take cooking classes and go to therapy and come home and say *guess what Kathy said*.” Bev quite likes Ben’s therapist, though she’s never met her in person. “And... bicker about who put the mail where, and fold the clothes, and I’m probably going to put things that should be dry-cleaned through the washing machine, I’m sorry in advance.”

She laughs silently, her shoulders hunching forward with it.

“It’ll be a really nice washing machine,” he offers. “You’ll say *I’m so mad at Ben for ruining this cashmere pashmina, but—*” He can’t keep the smile off his face. “*—but I’m glad we picked this machine at the store, it’s very efficient.*”

She giggles. “Do you know what a pashmina is?”

“I don’t—is it like a scarf? I’m guessing scarf.” He second-guesses that and asks, “Is it a hat? I’m a simple man, I have the same denim shirt in four different washes. Is it a hat or a scarf? It’s definitely an accessory.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not sure at all.”

“I love you,” she says.

It sinks into his stomach, warm and comforting as a coal. He's still sweaty and gross and he only ate half his breakfast, but he's reasonably sure that this is more important. Even Kathy would say this is more important, right? He can eat later. With Bev, if she wants that.

"I love you too," he says.

She smiles. "Build me a house, and I'll marry you."

Ben licks his lips. "Okay."

"Go take a shower," she tells him.

"Okay." He gets up without questioning it. He wants to kiss her but he's aware that he does not smell great at the moment. He turns back, halfway across the living room, to ask, "Do you want breakfast?"

"I do want breakfast."

Is life this easy? Ben misjudges the width of the hallway that he measured himself and clips off the wall. He keeps going.

Bev's divorce certificate comes in the mail.

She has the divorce decree in her folder of important documents. Ben very carefully made a space for her to store them in his desk; Bev has no doubt she will completely forget where they are when she needs them and then run around like a chicken with her head cut off until Ben fishes the folder out again. This idea probably ought to bother her more than it does.

The decree was issued by the court. Marianne walked her through it, her last day in Chicago. Afterwards Kay and Bev went out to the Russian Tea Room with James the bodyguard, who charmed the waitstaff by translating Bev's and Kay's orders into Russian for them. Kay refuses to say where she found this bodyguard to hire him, but Bev remains baffled by the whole exchange.

She paid five dollars for the certificate. It was verified by a notary. Bev is now free to use it as a reference when she changes her name back, when she files taxes as a single person, and when she decides to get married again. It's a funny little document, almost as momentous as a marriage certificate in the first place—*Beverly Marsh and Tom Rogan, Chicago Illinois*, and the date.

So Bev's a free woman.

Ben's in the study on the phone with his firm. Bev has been a little leery about asking for details with how he's dealing with the public relations nightmare that was the altercation outside the courthouse. She still feels like it's mostly her fault. She doesn't know whether Ben's public image would be improved or worsened if they made it official, and she's almost afraid to ask lest he doubt her motivations.

She leans back on the low couch and pulls her phone out of her pocket. She has a new smartphone using the number from the cheap flip phone Ben got her in Bangor. Kay's in there, and Lesley. Select people that Bev wants to take with her into her new life.

Bev Marsh, Part Two.

"Electric Boogaloo," she murmurs to herself, scrolling through her contacts. She hits the name and puts the phone to her ear, laying back before she can second-guess herself. The phone rings. It's oddly high-pitched. She can't tell if it's because she's paying more attention to it than usual or if different satellites actually have different tones.

"Hello," says Bill.

"Hi," Bev says. "Got a minute?"

"Sure." There's a faint clunking sound in the background. She imagines him wheeling away from his desk in a rolling chair. "I'm editing and it feels like self-evisceration. You're doing me a favor."

She smiles a little and then says, "I got my divorce certificate."

"Good for you," Bill says sincerely.

She gnaws her lower lip, trying to decide how to phrase this with the

least potential for misunderstanding.

“I love Ben,” she says, because it’s necessary to make that clear right off the bat, lest he get confused about why she’s calling.

“I know.”

“I think I’m going to marry him.”

There’s a smile in Bill’s voice when he replies, “Good for you. Did he propose, or is this in the abstract?”

Everything’s in the abstract. Leaping off the cliff into the quarry and knowing she’ll be fine when she hits the water.

“I think I might have proposed. I’m not sure. When we’re officially engaged we’ll tell all the Losers together, probably.” That’s not the point, she’s getting sidetracked.

Before she can redirect Bill says, very sincerely, “I’m glad. You deserve the best things in the world, Bev.”

She doesn’t know about that, but she smiles.

“And Ben’s that,” Bill says, and clears his throat awkwardly. “And I’m not just saying that because I now know... six of the best people in the world.”

She finds herself doing that, too. Defaulting to six, like Stan is right there with them, like he’ll meet them at the airport, like he’s only running late to the gathering because he’s out picking up a bottle of wine, like he’ll bring his wife to dinner and introduce them any night now, any hour now, any minute now.

Someday her grief for everything they should have been able to have—thirty years of knowing each other—will ossify. She’ll learn how to move around it, how to stop trying to pierce through it, stop trying to solve it. Just accept it as a framework for her life. Something to use like a dressform, a mannequin on which to hang the rest of her self.
Bev Marsh, Part Two.

“I wanted to ask if you and your wife are okay,” she says. And she

has to press on because she can't sit with that silence. "I'm—still kind of mad that I was a part of that, Bill. I mean, it's one thing for—you know what Tom was like." He doesn't, but he has an idea, and Bill makes his living on his imagination and on extrapolation. "But you love her."

"I do." There's a pause and then Bill says, his voice more dejected, "Beverly, it's not your fault."

A lot of men tell her that these days. She had no idea that she was going to turn forty-one and then unlock all of the men in the world willing to take the blame that should have been rationed out carefully over her lifetime.

"It's not you," Bill says. "That was—something I did. I hurt my wife, you weren't a part of it. And we've been going to marriage counseling, we're working it out. But it's not your fault."

She almost believes him. Something close to belief. Belief-adjacent.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asks. She doesn't know why she's invested in Bill's marriage—it's not like anything would change if he were a free agent, she's happy, that was why it was important to say up front that she loves Ben, that she's going to marry him, that he's... What was it Richie said? Bev's all in.

"I hope so," Bill says.

It's weirdly more reassuring than a definite yes or no. Bev is relieved that he makes room for Audra's choice there. It's not Bill Denbrough deciding *yes we're going to be okay* or *no we're not going to be okay*. It's *I hope we're going to be okay* and making room for Audra to meet him halfway, if she wants. And if she doesn't...

"We're going to Orlando," he says, a note of irony in his voice.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. She wants to meet Mike. And I figured, out of everyone, he's probably the easiest to start with. You know how it is."

Bev briefly imagines introducing Kay to more of the Losers than just

Ben and realizes that Kay's probably going to murder Richie.

"You're right," she says.

She doesn't know how she didn't realize this sooner. It's definitely going to happen. She doesn't even think she's explained to Kay that her friend Richie is *that* Richie Tozier, of the flat womanizing comedy routines and the casual usage of the word *pussy*. Mike is a small-town librarian turned travel writer with a surprisingly successful blog and a bright pink e-reader; he's the obvious choice for a gentle introduction.

"But, uh... I hope, when things are settled." She doesn't know whether he means settled for her or for him, but probably both. "I hope you and Ben would be willing to meet her?"

"Yeah," Bev says. She's not jealous of this woman who ended up with Bill Denbrough. And if Bill loves her, she must be something. "Yeah, if that's something she'd want. I'm sure Ben wouldn't mind."

"Yeah. No plans for the moment," Bill says. "But maybe Los Angeles over the holidays this year. She has good reason to be there, anyway. Maybe. There are contracts in negotiation, I don't even know all the details. I can work anywhere."

"Are you still mad you missed Richmas?" Bev asks dryly.

"Yes and no," Bill replies. "Mike kept drunk-texting me all through New Year's. I'm a little afraid of the things that happen when I'm not there."

She laughs. "Why?"

"I don't know what Richie's been saving up to say to one of my girlfriends over the course of thirty years, but I'm terrified," Bill says.

"Yeah, you really dug yourself a hole with the dick jokes last year," Bev says.

"I know. I'm doomed. I don't remember half the shit I did when we were kids, and I'm afraid that everyone else *does*, and Audra's going to go *Who are you?*"

There's a note of raw sincerity in his voice—like that's a little closer to the wound than he necessarily wanted it to be. Tom didn't know who Bev was at all—but Bev didn't either, it turns out.

The door to the study opens slowly and Ben peers out, his eyebrows raised in question.

"It's Bill," Bev tells him. "Sorry, am I being too loud?" She doesn't want any of his business associates to hear her talking about dick jokes in the next room; that's not the kind of impression she wants to make.

He shakes his head and drops a kiss on her head on his way to the kitchen. "Hi, Bill."

"Ben says hi," she reports.

"Hi, Ben," Bill says obediently.

"Bill says hi," Bev tells him.

Ben is in the kitchen pouring himself water.

"So the screenwriting thing didn't work out?" Bev asks.

Bill makes a slightly strangled noise. "No. Never again. Adaptations yes, screenwriting itself no." There's a pause. "I'm working on something else now, anyway."

Bev thinks about the *William Denbrough* page that Mike pulled up on his magic Kindle. The thousands of titles, the different birthdates and middle names. She wonders if he gets on the phone and talks to Mike about his creative process, if he bounces story ideas off him. She wonders what a paradox law is.

"Yeah?" she prompts him.

"Yeah," he says. "How about you? Going independent?"

She has a couple of sketches. "Florals are in," she tells him. She doesn't expect him to know any more about it than Ben knew about pashminas. "I'm leaning into it. I've been thinking a lot about

gardening. Pulling up weeds, you know, making room for things.” Yanking vines out of the ground, tossing them on a burn pile. No more choking out the flowers. Birds hopping on little stone paths, pecking at the ground.

Bill laughs a little. “I think I’m working on the opposite.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah—you know, uh, scar tissue can grow way beyond the boundaries of wounds. So I’m... doing something with that concept.”

Bev has keloids in her earlobes right now; she gets it. “Is scar tissue the opposite of gardening?”

“It feels like it, doesn’t it?” Bill asks.

She finds that she has one hand on her chest, her thumb pressed tight to the burn scar inches under her collarbone. It doesn’t hurt. Sometimes she can’t find it through the fabric of her shirt. She puts her hand down.

“Weirdly, yes,” she says. “Is that what the next bestselling horror novel is going to be about?”

“Uh...” Bill sounds almost reluctant to give details. “How much gore are you comfortable with? Because Audra and I have a rule about how much I’m allowed to explain over dinner.”

“I’m not eating right now or anything,” she says dryly.

“Okay.” There’s something close to excitement in Bill’s voice—something childlike. “So this thing happens when you contract scurvy, where old scar tissue can open up and start bleeding again because the collagen in them breaks down.”

Bev feels her mouth open. Ben, in the kitchen, asks, “What?”

“Oh my god, Bill, that’s horrifying.”

“Isn’t it?” Bill asks.

Bev shakes her head, leans back, and says, “Ben, add oranges to the shopping list, I’m fucking *terrified* of scurvy now.”

Ben looks nonplussed, but he obliges and makes a note on the notepad on the fridge.

“That’s how I’m going to pitch it to my editor,” Bill says. “I’m going to singlehandedly increase citrus sales.”

“Driving imports from Florida and ensuring Mike Hanlon an altogether more prosperous life,” Bev says.

“With Mike’s new career in Florida oranges, yes,” Bill replies.

“Don’t ever tell Eddie that thing about the collagen.”

“Oh god, no. I know my audience.”

There’s silence for a moment. Bev finds a loose thread on the couch cushion and idly plays with it, winding it through her fingers.

Bill asks, “Are we okay, Bev?”

Bev glances back at Ben, who is still drinking water like it’s going out of style. He smiles at her.

“Yeah,” she says. “We’re okay.”

“Good,” Bill says. “I’m glad.”

He doesn’t say *I love you*, but she knows. Eddie turned bright red when she said it when he dropped them off at the airport, but he did hug them so tightly Bev wondered if he was going to let them go. Mike just smiled. Richie says it under his breath whenever she does something particularly audacious.

She hasn’t dreamed of Stan in a while, but he’s hers, just the same.

Once she’s off the phone with Bill, she says to Ben, “Question.”

He crosses the house and sits beside her on the couch. He’s wearing the collared shirt and blazer that are his uniform when he has to

make video calls for business; she reaches up without thinking about it and absently fingers the material of his jacket. “Yes, ma’am.”

“How does restoration factor into your house designs?” she asks.

His eyebrows climb a little. “Like, housing restoration?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Something old. Or are you dead set on starting from scratch?”

Ben grins at her. “You want to remodel a house?”

“I might.”

“Are you talking, like, HGTV remodeling, or like the Canadian farmhouse restoration?”

“Do you want to move to Canada?” she asks him.

“We could.” She pushes her fingers in his hair and he lets his head loll onto her shoulder. “I don’t know how we’d break it to Ricky Lee, though.”

Bev laughs. “That’s right. I guess we have to stay in the US. For Ricky Lee.” She’s met Ricky Lee’s three kids, actually. They call her *Miss Bev*. Watching Ben interact with kids makes her idly want one—he has a smile that makes her think *Oh man, he needs to be a dad*. Gwen Stefani’s “Simple Kind of Life” is on in the back of her head basically all the time.

Bev Marsh, Part Two.

“Are you gonna do that thing the guy from *Queer Eye* does where he gets really excited over shiplap?”

“Shiplap gets kind of dusty,” Ben says. “Your room feels so much bigger, but it’s all about location.”

“Location, location, location,” Bev tells him.

He leans forward and kisses her, sweet and soft. Then he asks, “Do you want to see sketches?”

“Yes, I want to see sketches.”

He pecks her one more time on the mouth and then gets up. “Tell me what you really think. It won’t hurt my feelings.”

He shows her photos of beadboard staircases, explains how to make v-groove more glamorous than rustic, and makes a strong case for marble countertops. They don’t get to actually look at his sketchbook before she pins him on the couch and kisses him, kisses him, kisses him.

17. Out of All the Worlds

Summary for the Chapter:

Fred Hanscom welcomes you to the Graustark Homestead. Ben builds his love. Bev has misgivings and concerns. Richie is Extra. Eddie is the best. Kay McCall has no time for anyone's shit. Bill has news. Stan shows up underdressed without an RSVP. Mike has all the answers. There's a kiss, obviously.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, sorry I've been AWOL for so long--my dog died in mid-November and it made writing about Fred kind of difficult for me? So when there are particularly doggy moments in here, just know that I pulled a lot of them from my own good dog. Also I started a new job this month and some of my writing time has been eaten up accordingly. And I lost NaNoWriMo, but if you're here because you liked my Reddie, I have some stuff in the works.

Warnings for this chapter: mentions of the Confederacy, mentions of canonical axe-murder, closet jokes. Discussion of pregnancy and abortion. Richie Tozier is Richie Tozier. Discussion of canonical child abuse and child sex abuse (Alvin Marsh) and the bystander effect. Reference to gendered insults. Mention of sexualization of a minor. Reference to fertility treatments. Indecent exposure.

On Thursday, the best man arrives at the Graustark Homestead.

"And where do you want me to park?" Eddie asks. His voice is tense even through the feedback on his carphone.

"Just on the lawn," Ben tells him.

Bev is cutting an apple with a paring knife, sitting on top of the kitchen counter and smirking at him.

“You want me to park on the lawn?”

Of everyone involved in this wedding, Eddie has the most difficulty grasping the concept ‘casual ceremony.’ He believes the phrase is an oxymoron. He called Ben to politely interrogate him about the engagement ring he was getting Beverly and then offered to fly out to Nebraska to help him shop. Ben had already given Bev a ring.

“Yeah, just on the lawn,” Ben says.

“...Where on the lawn?”

There’s faint snickering in the background. Ben turns to Bev and makes eye contact. Bev’s knife casually bites through her apple. The skin peels away in a red strip. Her smirk widens a little before she redirects her attention to the task at hand.

She’s wearing a large sweatshirt and leggings. She looks extremely comfortable. Ben loves it.

“Just anywhere,” Ben says again.

Richie says, “Haystack, just pick a spot.”

He’s not on speaker, but apparently he’s loud enough that Bev can hear him, because she starts laughing.

“By the barn,” Ben says. “I’ll come out and direct you.”

“Thank you,” Richie says.

“You don’t have to come out and direct me!” Eddie says at the same time. “Ben, you have enough going on.”

“What’s going on right now is lunch,” Ben replies. “And besides, your number one fan wants to see you.”

Eddie’s tone is resigned. “...You mean Fred, don’t you?”

“I do mean Fred.”

Fred, hearing his name, lifts his head. He’s camped out under the kitchen table for no discernable reason. They didn’t tell him to go there, but he’s sulking as though they’ve put him in time out. He could climb out literally whenever he wants. He keeps grumbling.

Richie cheers in the background. The last time that they visited, Fred was still acclimating. He’s accustomed to Ben through exposure and repeated proof that no matter what happens, Ben is extremely predictable. He hated Richie because Richie is loud, large, and all over Bev—the three things that offend Fred most in the world. But Fred loved Eddie last time he saw him.

“Yes, my friend Fred.”

“Freds!” Richie declares.

“I will push you out of the moving car.”

“Aw, don’t be jealous, Eddie.”

Ben does go outside and direct Eddie as he pulls up in the Escalade. Eddie is visibly uncomfortable parking on the lawn, his face creased in concentration as he follows Ben’s air-traffic-controller gestures. Eddie also keeps glancing around like he expects the dog to come bursting out of nowhere, but Fred’s back up at the house. In the passenger seat, Richie is hanging on to the door handle and, judging from the smirk on his face and his open mouth, clearly making some kind of comment.

When Eddie cuts the engine almost immediately Richie opens the passenger door and stands up and out of the car. “What the fuck, Haystack?” he demands.

Ben lowers both arms and just grins, smiling. The house is a restoration—some of its old Victorian elements are still intact. Ben totally did over the edifice in brick and wood, but the big plantation porch is still there. The barns and outbuildings are all original, and he used the rafters of one that was in extremely bad repair to put up crossbeams on his additions to the house. In the event of weather, it’s

entirely possible to move the entire ceremony from the front lawn—not near where Eddie has parked, instead over by the big tree—into one of the outbuildings. Ben has purchased a ton of white Christmas lights, just in case.

It's a real farmhouse—or it was, back in the day. He calls it the Graustark Homestead, after the last owners of the farm when it was still functional. Now it's all grown over. In his portfolio, the house is listed as *January Embers*, but he only has a few pictures of it. The outside, the kitchen, a hallway. It's mostly for Bev, and he doesn't want to share it with the rest of the world.

The Losers, though, they're different. He's all right with letting them in, even if it'll never be *for* them the way it is for her. There's something embarrassing about it at the same time, too, in a way that it wasn't embarrassing to have them walk into the Bohemian Girl. Like the first time all his new friends from school—well, from playing in the water down in the Barrens—came over to his room and Bev spotted his New Kids poster. Part of him still feels like Richie's gonna take one look at it and mock him endlessly.

"I feel like a Confederate soldier is gonna show up on that porch and propose to me," Richie says.

To be fair, no matter what the house looked like, Richie would mock him endlessly. Ben tries to remind himself of that as he keeps his gaze determinedly on his own roofline.

"Fucking *what?*" Eddie demands.

"And then go die in the war," Richie says. "I mean, I'm not saying I'm gonna *marry* the Confederate soldier, it's bad taste to get engaged at someone else's wedding—"

"*That's* why you're not marrying the Confederate soldier?"

"How about because there *is* no Confederate soldier."

"How about because *the Confederacy was bad, Richie?*" Eddie steps down from the car, looking tense in a way that Ben hasn't seen in a while.

“We have the suits,” he says to Ben with no segue. He goes around to the backseat and starts pulling garment bags down. “But if Bill or Mike need alterations, we’re going to have to—”

“Eddie,” Richie says.

Eddie turns around and visibly resets. He puts the garment bags back on the seat of the car and comes over to hug Ben. “Hey, congratulations, are you ready?”

“There we go,” Richie says.

“Shut up, Rich,” Eddie says, not without affection, hypothetical Confederate soliders notwithstanding. He releases Ben and then holds him by the shoulders, his face turning serious. “How do you feel? How are your stress levels?”

“My stress levels are fine,” Ben replies dryly.

“That’s because Eddie absorbed everyone else’s,” Richie says. He presses his cheek to Ben’s as he hugs him, and whispers, “Hey, before you make it official—if you hurt her I’ll literally axe murder you, you know that, right?”

As Ben pulls away he gives Richie an incredulous look. “Do you think that’s a risk?”

“No,” Richie replies, smiling.

“What?” Eddie asks. “What did he say?” He squints at Richie. “What did you say?”

“I’m just reminding him that Bev gets me in the divorce.”

“That’s gonna be awkward for you two,” Ben says.

“Yes, our relationship is totally dependent on yours. No pressure.” He turns back around. “Jesus Christ, every time I look at that house it gets bigger.”

“We should get the suits somewhere safe,” Eddie says.

“My office,” Ben replies. It’s where his tux for the ceremony is stored, and it’s a safe distance from Bev’s office, where her dress is hidden. He hasn’t seen it yet and kind of wants to preserve that until the wedding itself—he has an idea of turning to see Bev and suddenly being hit in the face with the sight of her, and it’s kind of juvenile but he wants to preserve that moment. “But bring your bags in, I’ll show you where your room is.”

Richie cups both hands over his mouth and yells, “*Beverlyyyyyy*” like he’s trying to summon her. Normally loud, Richie’s voice carries across the lawn without issue.

The screen door squeaks as it opens. Ben has offered to oil it, but he suspect Bev prefers knowing when people are coming and going in their home. They have a security system, but the big dog and the squeaky hinges are reassuring, especially when Ben has to travel and Bev is in the house by herself.

“Fucking *what?*” Bev calls back at him, as Fred darts out in a dark-brindled blur and torpedoes himself toward them like a heat-seeking missile.

“Oh man,” Eddie says, tensing.

Richie begins loudly and tunelessly singing “Here Comes the Bride.” It is clear that he knows none of the words, and he trails off into *duh-duh-duhs*.

Bev smiles as she comes down the steps, slow and casual. She has no makeup on. He wants to tuck her head beneath his chin and stand there with his hands in the sweatshirt pockets.

Fred stops a good two yards away from Eddie. The dog’s butt hits the dirt, and Fred wags his tail, vibrates with suppressed intensity, and whimpers.

“Fred,” Bev says warily.

Fred whimpers again.

Ben looks at Eddie to see if any dog-related trauma is coming out at the moment, but Eddie just looks resigned.

"Have I told you how much I love that your dog doesn't jump?" he asks Ben, as though it's the only nice thing he can think to say about the dog.

"Yes," Ben says. "Every time you see him."

"He's a good dog with excellent taste," Richie says, and goes over to scratch Fred's ears. Fred ducks his head a little, sniffs at Richie, and then allows it, still clearly desperate for Eddie to acknowledge him.

"Do you want help with the bags?" Ben asks Eddie.

"No, no, you don't have to do anything," Eddie says quickly. "I have —Richie." This last is less a declaration and more a demand for Richie to come over and get stuff out of the car.

Bev smiles as she hugs him. "How was the drive?"

"We made good time," Eddie says, seeming genuinely pleased by that.

Richie is now on the ground with Fred standing on his chest and licking his face. "Love you, Bev," he says.

"Love you too, Richie."

"I'll carry the suits," Ben says, making the executive decision to help with his own damn wedding. "Come on up to the house."

Bev whistles Fred off of Richie, and Richie gets up and helps Eddie collect luggage from the Escalade. Bev actually takes a bag out of Eddie's hands and Eddie protests, but she just ignores him. Ben picks up the four garment bags and hooks their hangers on his palm, and then grabs a duffel out of the trunk. He walks along at the back of the group, herding them along after Bev.

Eddie asks, "So how are Bill and Mike getting here tomorrow? Are we going to pick them up or are they renting cars or what?"

"Bill's getting in very early," Bev replies. She holds the door open while they all shuffle in with the luggage; Ben puts his hand on the door over her head and holds it for her in turn. "He said he's driving

down on his own, but Mike's getting in around eleven and we'll have to go pick him up." She ducks inside and Ben follows her.

"I'll do it," Eddie says. "Unless—are you having the rehearsal at the same time as the wedding? Are there other things I should be doing? Do you have an itinerary?"

"I have a spreadsheet," Ben replies.

Richie is standing in the entryway, having abandoned the luggage in favor of staring at the walls. The wallpaper Ben chose because it reminded him of Bev—it's not original William Morris textiles, but it's definitely inspired by him. Bev told him he couldn't make the entire house red and white if he expected her to live in it, and so the wallpaper is green silk, hand-painted with branches and flowers and the suggestion of birds. He doesn't know why he associates this aesthetic so strongly with Bev, when she showed up to Derry in stark black and white. He supposes it also makes him think of those long-stemmed reeds in the Barrens. They all called it bamboo. In Ben's head, Bev is red and white, but she's also nature. When she stands in this room her eyes are green, green, green.

Toward the back of the house, functioning as the heart of the whole building, is the fireplace. Ben would not budge on this. There are at least four other chimneys in the place, but they're mostly decorative; this one runs up the back of the house like a spine and strikes through the point of the gable. The floor beneath it is stone to reduce the fire hazard that naturally comes from having such a massive fireplace. To the left of the fireplace is the back door, through which Ben and Bev will exit on Saturday to attend their wedding reception. To the right, the stairs climb up to the landing that runs around the room.

Richie tilts his head all the way back to look up to the high ceiling. "Don't tell him you have a spreadsheet, he'll never leave," he says almost absently. "You know Bev's itty-bitty, right? Those are some big stairs."

"I want to be able to go sledding in my own home when I feel like it," Bev says.

“Oh shit, have you had a bachelorette party yet? Can we do that for it?”

“You absolutely cannot,” Eddie says. “You are an old man and you’ve already—”

“You know you only bring up my back when you don’t want me to do something, when I’m hauling your stuff around—”

“—broken collarbone on her *wedding day*, I will blame you—”

“—breaks anything else that would be fine?”

“So, your room,” Ben says. When he glances over at her, Bev is smiling.

They go up the stairs. To the right, facing the back of the house, is the library at the far end, then the smallest guest room, then the hall bathroom, and then the master bedroom. The master bedroom looks out over the lawn; there was an original balcony on it but Ben took one look at it and broke out into safety-regulation-related hives. Now he’s certain that Bev won’t walk out onto it and immediately fall to her death, they have a little bench out there, and some planter pots with climbing vines. On nights when Ben wakes up and can’t breathe he slides the screen door back and the air flows into the room like the house is inhaling with him.

On the left side of the landing, there is Bev’s study. Inside there is a spiral staircase that take her up to the third floor, making her a kind of tower in which to do her design work, store her fabric, and sew. The room is very black and white, with framed postcards. They’re going to slowly swap them out for actual postcards of places they’ve been, but for now they’re just decorative. Ben thought a lot about ink stamps on passports and wrought iron and visiting landmarks when he was filling in the bare bones of the room, but Bev laughed when she saw the dress model he’d put in there as an indicator of what the room was supposed to be. Apparently it was more decorative than useful, its pale burlap studded with postage marks; she kept it anyway, functioning as a kind of hat rack in the corner by her desk.

The guest rooms are lined up next to Bev’s tower. Mike, Bill and

Audra, and Richie and Eddie in that order. At the very end of the row, Richie and Eddie's guest room looks out onto the backyard. When he was designing it, he couldn't think of anything other than Eddie staring out the back window of the Bohemian Girl, and how he held his arm like a broken wing as he gazed over the hill. Ben remembered that and filled the room with long windows, light and air and sun.

It took until after the room was already finished before Bev turned to him and asked if he meant to design the room without a closet. Ben can't wait for Richie to notice and make a crack about it.

Ben floats along after them with the sort of apprehensive eagerness of someone giving someone a gift they're really proud of and waiting for a response. He watches them push open the door and set their luggage inside. Eddie immediately goes over to the window and looks out, leaning on the bay sill. Richie turns to look at the framed poster on the wall.

"Do you want me to sign it?" he asks, glancing back at Ben with a smirk.

It's from his latest tour, the one where Bev and Ben went to the theater in person and had front-row tickets reserved for them.

"No, we only put it up for you," Ben says. "We keep it in the closet the rest of the year round."

Eddie barks a laugh and then comes out of the tower, grinning. "That's the opposite of the point of the tour."

"That's right!" Richie says, turning to Ben. After a moment he flings himself down on the guest bed and snow-angels out on the comforter, his shoes politely kept on the floor. "Might have to take it down, I don't know if Eds'll be able to keep his hands off me with a pin-up on the wall." The poster is not by any stretch of the imagination a pin-up; Richie's wearing a blazer and holding a microphone.

"That's why we put you on the end," Ben replies dryly. "Least chance of overhearing anything."

Richie cackles and Eddie blushes bright red.

“Tell me it isn’t,” he says.

Ben shakes his head. “Of course not. This is the Kaspbrak-Tozier suite.”

Eddie turns to Ben. “Do we have time for me to take a shower?”

“Of course we have time,” Ben says, nonplussed. The wedding isn’t until Saturday. It’s Thursday. Eddie can take a number of showers.

“Great,” says Eddie. “You get the itinerary ready—where’s your office?”

“I’ll show you.” The hangers for the garment bags are still cutting into his palm. Eddie follows him out of the room again, but Richie shows no inclination to get up.

As they go, Richie calls after them, “Hey, unless you need me, I’m gonna look for secret passageways in your house.”

“Ask Bev,” Ben replies.

Eddie looks at him. “Are there passageways?”

“Not technically?” Ben asks. “The study has doors behind the bookcase, but they just go down into the cellar.”

Eddie comes to a halt. Ben turns around to look at him, checking his face automatically. He looks weirdly stricken, and Ben automatically runs back through the last thing he said, trying to figure out health hazards of cellars. But Eddie knows he’d never bring them into a house that was less than perfectly safe, right?

Then Eddie hugs him.

Ben blinks and staggers a little bit under the unexpected ferocity of it, but he steadies himself and wraps his free arm around Eddie’s shoulders. “You okay?” he asks, patting his back.

Eddie takes a step back and nods, his jaw set and determined.

“Yeah.” He reaches out and claps Ben on the shoulder in turn, and then clears his throat. “We’re gonna get you married, man.”

Beverly is getting married in some seventy-two hours and she hates her dress.

She doesn’t even have an excuse, because she designed it herself. But that shifty indifference that came on her in the middle of sewing it has sharpened over the days, and when she finished it she tried to decide if it was leftover anxiety about getting married again. Her last wedding was in front of the justice of the peace with Kay and a courthouse clerk as their only witnesses. This wedding—which will be the last wedding she ever has, she’s decided—has more ceremony than that, but not all of the traditional ones. For instance, she told Ben that she was going to see him the day of the ceremony. She will never *not* look at him when she has the chance.

But the dress will be a surprise to him.

So she calls Kay and puts her on video chat.

“I mean, it’s a pretty dress,” Kay says. She’s in an airport right now; there’s a gray speckled wall behind her and humming background noise. “It’s beautiful.” She laughs, suddenly.

Bev, who has her arm extended as she points the camera at the dress and circles it, turns the screen back to herself. “What?”

“Look at your seams. I can tell your man’s an architect.”

Bev looks at her seams—the thick structure of them—and smiles faintly. Some of the tension in her chest eases. “But it’s not just me, is it?” she asks. It’s been a while since Kay’s designed her own stuff, but Bev trusts her eye. (Mostly. Not when it comes to that review she wrote of Ben’s BBC tower.)

Kay’s mouth pulls to the side, and the line of her scar tightens across her cheek. Over the last couple of years it’s become shiny and no less prominent. Kay could have seen a plastic surgeon to do the repairs, but aside from tending to the wound with scar cream Kay has made

no concessions toward anyone who might stare at her.

“It’s beautiful,” she says again, the *but* clear in her tone. “And it’s polished, and it’s professional, and it looks designer.”

Bev feels the click and knows what Kay’s about to say before she says it. “And it doesn’t look like me at all.”

“Not even a little bit,” Kay says.

She groans. “I have until Saturday. It’s Thursday.”

“I’ve seen you pull off tighter turnarounds,” Kay says. “Look, it’s just a dress. Don’t stress yourself out over a party. Just...”

Bev waits and then prompts, “Just?”

“Just make sure it’s the dress you’re feeling iffy about,” Kay says. “And not the groom.”

Bev grins. “You sound like my therapist.”

“I am so sorry,” Kay says seriously, and then laughs. “Really, though. If you want to bail, just tell him you’re going to pick me up at the airport and then buy a ticket.”

Bev smiles. “I appreciate it,” she says dryly. Kay doesn’t dislike Ben, but she likes to give him a hard time just because he’s with Bev. Bev, in turn, doesn’t let her get too harsh. “But I’m set on Ben. I’m not—” She takes a deep breath. “It’s different.”

“I know it’s different,” Kay says. “For once I’m not casting aspersions on the men in your life—I’m gonna fight that fucking comedian, I swear.”

“Please don’t fight Richie,” Bev says. “You’ll win, but Eddie will get really mad and it’ll ruin the wedding, and most of that was the stage persona—”

“It came out of his mouth and he’s responsible for it,” Kay says, which is what she’s been saying since Bev told her how jealous Richie was that she made Kay her maid of honor. “But that’s not the point.

All I mean is that, maybe it's the wedding itself that's freaking you out."

Bev sits down at her worktable and drums her fingers on the few square inches of clear space. "I mean—my life's not gonna change," she says. "He's—we already live together, we have a dog, he's never asked to combine our accounts or anything, I'm still going to work under my name."

"As you should," Kay says, because she doesn't understand the appeal of becoming Mrs. Beverly Hanscom. As far as she knows, *Marsh* is all Beverly's name, it has no associations with any Alvin or Elfridas that she doesn't know about.

"I just—the buyers," Bev says, because a few of them are coming. Just some of the bigger ones that she's had good relationships with for a long time. Some of Ben's more important colleagues are coming as well, just out of respect.

"Fuck the buyers," Kay says immediately. Then she looks around herself and, in a lower voice, mutters, "Shit, there's a kid." She clears her throat. "This is your wedding. All you're doing is making a choice and telling other people about it. Now is not the time to be putting on a show for anyone but yourself."

Bev sighs. "You're right. When you're right, you're right."

"And I'm always right," Kay says.

She leans back and touches her own cheek. "And I can tell that I'm PM—" She stops, blinks, and starts counting.

"You're PMSed?" Kay asks, her tone full of sympathy.

Bev takes a deep breath through her nose and closes her eyes. "I'm late, actually."

"Okay," Kay says calmly. "How late?"

"I was supposed to start Monday," Bev says. "I remember—I was so pissed when I realized I was going to have my period during the wedding, and they've been so heavy lately, I thought I was just

getting older, but I should definitely be bleeding by now.” She’s been late before, but she’s never been *this late*.

“Okay,” Kay says. “Could you be pregnant?”

“I mean, it’s possible,” Bev says. It hasn’t ever seemed likely, but it’s possible. None of them showed up to Derry with kids, and at their age? It seemed statistically unlikely.

“Got a test?”

“No,” Bev says. She looks back at her dress.

“Buy a pregnancy test. Read the instructions,” Kay says. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll be there tonight, I’ll help you with the dress. If you’re only three days late, you can’t know anything right now anyway.”

She sighs. “Yeah, I just...” She wishes Kay were here already. She could go out and tell Ben that she’s late right now, and he would be every bit as supportive as Kay, and probably run out to buy the test for her himself if she said she’d rather sit here and design a new wedding dress and try not to think about a possible pregnancy. “...I don’t need this right now.”

“You’re not gonna solve any problems between now and your actual wedding,” Kay says. “It’s not happening right now. Buy the test. I think you’re supposed to take them in the morning, anyway, and maybe there are directions about how long since your last period you’re supposed to take them? It’s fine.”

“I’m forty-three.” She’s old. It’ll be a risky pregnancy. God, when her kid’s her age, she’ll be an octogenarian, if she’s still alive.

“It’s fine, Bev.” Kay smiles. “I’ll be there tonight. One thing at a time.”

There isn’t much to talk about after that, and of course Bev’s hopelessly distracted between the conspicuous lack of a period and the dress. She doesn’t have material. She has to go out and buy a pregnancy test and design a wedding dress and she doesn’t want Ben to see the wedding dress, and she doesn’t want to get Ben’s hopes up, honestly.

They've talked about kids. Bev kind of took it for granted that at her age she'd have to have some kind of fertility treatments, maybe IVF, maybe a surrogate. Ben needs to have kids, she's kind of convinced of it. He needs to be a dad. She's seen him smile at babies in restaurants, how happy he is when one acknowledges him.

She's less sure of herself, but with him, the idea isn't frightening. She thinks that, with how good Ben is, he could mediate out her bad impulses. She doesn't know what they'll be, but she has brutality and anxious indifference as models. But Ben's mother loved him in a way almost none of the parents in Derry seemed to love their children, and Ben still speaks fondly of her. If that's the impression that Bev leaves on her children, she'll be happy. It's just the getting there that seems next to impossible.

Unless, of course, this is an accidental pregnancy right when she thinks it'll never happen on its own. You hear those stories all the time, those miracle pregnancies right when the couple's on the verge of adopting, or when the mother thinks she's going into menopause. It would be some kind of weird fortune, all of her future slotting into place on one day.

She takes a few deep breaths and takes her phone out to text SOS.

After a few moments the phone buzzes in her hand. It's not a text notification, it's a call. She accepts it and puts the phone to her ear.

"I'm lost in your house, you have to come find me," Richie says.
"Also what's the SOS? Are you leaving Ben at the altar?"

"No," Bev replies. "I need to run errands and I need moral support and also maybe a distraction."

"Bev, I love you, but my distraction services have limits now."

She snorts. "I need you to drive and talk."

"Lucky for you, those are two of my special skills," Richie says. "I'm in a really tiny bathroom and I might be underground. How did I get here and where are the stairs?"

"Is it a square bathroom?" Bev asks.

“I mean, I left my measuring tape in my suitcase.”

She smiles despite herself. She’s pretty sure he’s in the powder room.
“Is there a bathtub or a shower in it?”

“Nope. Just a toilet.”

“You’re in the basement. I’ll come get you.” She goes down the spiral stairs, out onto the landing, and then down the main stairs. There’s a door to open that leads her down to the basement—finished, of course, with a television and a bar, because Ben has ideas about what constitutes a good hangout space even if he hasn’t done much hanging out in his life. She knocks on the powder room door.

Richie knocks back.

“I’m hanging up on you,” she says, and does.

When Richie opens the door his mouth is open in indignation. “You asked me for a favor and then you hung up on me. You’re lucky I like you, Marsh. Marsh-Hanscom.”

“I’m changing my name,” Bev replies.

“To Benjamin Marsh?” Richie asks.

Bev squints at that. “Did you steal that from Stephen Fry?”

“Yes, but it’s not plagiarism if I’m not onstage. What’s the emergency?”

She considers and then says, “Secret bridal party stuff you’re not allowed to tell Eddie about until after the wedding.”

Richie’s eyes go round and gleeful. “Beverly Elvira Marsh, are we getting you strippers?”

“No, but keep that energy up. First, I need you to come look at my dress.”

Richie, who is wearing a Hawaiian shirt, makes an incredulous face but says, “Okay,” in the tone of someone who has no idea why you

think they'd be useful in this scenario.

He proves this true by standing in Bev's office and looking at the dress form. The functional one, not the decorative one.

"Is it just me?" she asks.

"That's really fluffy," Richie says. "Hey, now I've seen this am I disqualified from challenging Ben for your hand at the altar?"

"The fact that Eddie will be standing literally right behind Ben disqualifies you from challenging Ben for my hand at the altar." She pulls on the asymmetrical skirt. "I think I was thinking too hard about the, like, the professional representation." She can see the influences of a blazer in the bodice now.

"The professional representation of what?"

"Being a designer making her own dress," she says. "I forgot this wasn't going in my portfolio, and I kind of—" She shrugs.

"You hate it."

"I hate it for me," she confirms. "I like my reception outfit better, here." She steps over and picks up the hanger with her reception dress, which is white satin and tapered and has a half-cape going over the shoulders.

Richie takes his glasses off and polishes them on his shirt. "Well, why don't you just wear that?"

Bev looks down at it.

"I mean, you went to all the trouble making yourself a second wedding dress." He puts his glasses back on and looks at her like he's genuinely waiting for her to list all the reasons she can't do that.

But it's a dress. She made it. It's white.

She hangs it on the end of the rack to study it one more time, then pulls out her phone to send a picture to Kay, complete with question mark caption. It's much more casual than the dress she had planned

on walking in, but she likes it better. She can still see the structured seams at the waist, which makes her smile now.

“There you go,” Richie says. “I gotta say if you’re looking for a gay man who knows anything about fashion you are going off in completely the wrong direction, but like, you ought to have five or six of them on speed dial or something. Anyway, what’s the emergency?”

Bev considers and then fires off a text to Ben: *Quick question, where are you and Eddie?*

Ben replies almost immediately. *Dining room. Strategizing. Why?*

Richie’s about to start yelling. Don’t freak out, everything’s fine. She tucks her phone in her pocket.

“Not cryptic at all,” Richie says easily.

“So normally I would make Kay do this with me, but she’s still traveling and she won’t be here until tonight. And you know you were my second choice for Composed Entirely of Honor.”

“Yeah, I still don’t have any guesses other than strippers, but I’ve seen Ben’s abs, it would be redundant at this point.”

“Don’t freak out,” Bev says.

Richie tilts his head to the side and widens his eyes at her behind his glasses.

“I need to go buy a pregnancy test, and I need moral support and you to *say nothing*.”

His face goes weirdly blank and then splits into a grin. “I fucking knew it!” he almost shouts, pointing at her.

“You did not!”

“Did so! Oh man, now I can stand behind him at the altar with a shotgun and be totally thematically appropriate.”

“That is absolutely not the theme of our wedding. This is a secret.”

“A *secret mission!*” Richie yells. “It’s a *secret!*” In an inside voice—for Richie, anyway—he says, “But thank you for trusting me with this, I am happy to help, *name it after me*. I’ll get the keys, you navigate.” He walks over to the stairs and starts descending two at a time. “Eat your heart out, matron of honor!”

“Don’t actually tell her that, she already hates you,” Bev says.

“That’s why I’m saying it while she’s not here. Because I am. Picking up her slack!”

She follows him up the stairs at a more sedate pace. Once he gets onto the ground floor she can hear him going, “Eddie! Where are you?” Fred sets up barking in alarm at the raised voices.

Ben is minding his own business in his dining room. He’s trying to go over the plan with his best man without sending Eddie into a panic spiral.

Eddie is being surprisingly game about the whole thing, much less anxiety and more grim determination as he makes notes about the rehearsal dinner, when Bev’s makeup artist and hairdresser will arrive, what time Ben plans to get up on Saturday, and how many showers there are in the house.

“And how’s your water pressure?” Eddie asks. “Is it plausible that you could have two different showers running at the same time?”

“Uh,” Ben says. “I can’t say I’ve ever tried it.”

Eddie’s eyes narrows and he adds something to his to-do list. Seriously. He brought a notepad and started building himself a to-do list, aside from the actual things that Ben asked him to do, which were only “pick up Mike from the airport” and “make sure that the suits get here.” Ben tried to tell him that he didn’t have to coordinate everything in the whole wedding—it’s not that formal—and Eddie immediately sent him a link to an article titled “The Best Man Duties Checklist.”

“Are you going to experiment on my plumbing?” Ben asks.

“I might,” Eddie says. “I have two days.”

There is a thud from somewhere down the hall. “Eddie! Where are you?” Richie calls. “I’m lost!”

Eddie doesn’t look up but his mouth stretches in a small smile. “In here, dumbass,” he calls back.

Fred, under the table because he doesn’t like the spiral staircase in Bev’s study, barks nervously.

“Hush,” Ben tells him.

“Sorry,” says Eddie.

“I was talking to the dog.”

“I know, I’m sorry I upset your dog.”

“He’s not upset.”

Richie finds his way to the dining room and comes through the archway with purpose, moving toward Eddie without hesitation. “Need the keys,” he says.

Eddie is still scanning the itinerary. “What for?”

“Secret mission. You can’t ask me any questions about it. Bridal party business. You’re on the other side. Very dramatic. Super romantic.”

Eddie looks up and raises an eyebrow. “You have secrets from me?”

“Bev has secrets from you,” Richie says. “Not me. I’m an open book. I’ll tell you anything you want to know and everything you don’t, like, just as soon as Bev says it’s okay.” He puts one hand on the table and leans over Eddie. “Keys?”

“Am I allowed to know where the secret mission is—*mmf!*”

Richie ducks his head and kisses Eddie full on the mouth. Ben blinks, startled, and leans back in his chair. When he looks over Richie’s

stooped shoulders he can see Bev appear in the hallway, and Fred immediately gets up and walks over to her. Bev surveys the scene—Richie is tilting Eddie's chair back at a frankly unsafe angle—and then raises her eyebrows at Ben. Her arms are folded.

Ben shrugs.

For a moment he thinks Richie is trying to grope Eddie in Ben's dining room, and then Eddie tilts his head back and breaks the kiss and says, "That's not even the right pocket, just—" There's a jingling as he produces the keys from his other side. "—take the keys and go, I'm busy, *do not drop me.*"

Richie rights Eddie's chair and takes the keys from him. "Thanks! See you after the secret mission!"

Eddie is bright red and holding onto the table as if that'll stop him from being tilted again. He's also furiously avoiding looking at Ben. "Hey," he says to Richie.

Richie, keys triumphantly clutched in his free hand, stops and turns back to him. Eddie lifts his chin and Richie takes the cue and pecks him on the mouth, practically PG-rated.

"Be safe."

"Yeah, well, I was thinking we'd go off-roading."

"Geocaching?" Eddie asks.

"Yeah, we're going geocaching, it's the lamest bachelorette party in the history of ever." He looks at Ben. "Just kidding, Bev and I are eloping to Mexico, see you!"

"Take sunscreen," Ben replies. Bev burns easily, and Richie's almost as pale.

Richie's delighted chortles follow him out of the room.

Bev waits for him to go and then comes around the dining room table. She leans down and kisses Ben on the mouth too. She smells like her shampoo and the laundry detergent from her clean

sweatshirt and Ben would go outside and marry her now if she asked. He wouldn't even stop to put on shoes.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Fine," Bev says easily. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"Okay. Know when you'll be back?"

"Soon. It'll be a quick trip. Just gotta pick up some stuff."

"Okay. We'll be here." He glances at Eddie for confirmation—he doesn't know what he's got planned. "We'll be here?"

"We'll be here." There are two flags of color standing high on Eddie's cheeks and he's still looking determinedly at his notepad.

Ben looks back up at Bev. "We'll be here."

"That's what I heard," she says.

"It's on the itinerary." There's an itinerary now. It's not just a schedule anymore.

"Well, if it's on the itinerary." She smiles at him and goes.

In the immediate wake of... whatever that was, Eddie is still looking embarrassed at the itinerary.

"You okay?" Ben asks him.

Eddie clears his throat. "Fine. So. Your wedding."

Torn between the need to put Eddie at ease and the desire not to cross any boundaries, Ben asks gently, "You know it's okay, right? We don't mind."

Eddie wipes at his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I know it's okay with you guys. So does he, or he wouldn't—do that, anyway. I'm not—" He looks up, something almost defensive in his face. "He's not—I'm not—he's."

Ben sits for a moment, waiting for Eddie to figure out what he wants

to say, and then he asks if Eddie wants a beer.

“That’d be great, actually, yeah,” Eddie says.

Ben gets up and goes into the kitchen and comes back with two bottles of beer and the opener. Some of Eddie’s blush has receded a little bit by the time he returns. Without saying anything, Ben opens the bottles and passes one over.

“So what time are you planning on waking up on Saturday?” Eddie asks.

Ben shrugs. “Like, sevenish?” The wedding itself isn’t until four, but Ben finds it’s easier for him to get up and eat breakfast and drink cold water at the same time every day, before he takes his shower. “I was still gonna run.”

“Good,” Eddie says. “I’ll join you, if that’s okay.”

“Of course, man.”

Eddie looks relieved, as if Ben was actually going to tell him no. Then his game face comes back. “What do you know about Bev’s maid of honor?”

“Kay McCall,” Ben replies. “She loves Bev, likes to pretend to hate me. Ardent feminist, published writer, wrote that article about how my radio tower is just a big penis before she even knew me. Also she keeps calling you *the Italian guy*.”

“I’m—not Italian?” Eddie offers, perplexed. “But it’s traditional for the maid of honor and the best man to dance together during the first dance, and I need to ask her if she wants to do that or if she’d prefer not to. And—” He points the end of his pen at Ben. “—the dance after the first dance is traditionally the bride and her father. How are you guys dealing with that?”

“Well, my mom’s dead too,” Ben says. “No parent dances.”

“My checklist says it’s a good move to dance with the bride as well,” Eddie reports. “Would it be appropriate for me to cut in?”

Ben laughs a little bit. “Yeah, Eddie, I think that would be appropriate.”

“You have your playlist picked out and everything?”

“Yep, it’s good to go.”

“Okay. So where are you storing your gifts?”

Ben frowns. “We don’t need gifts.”

Eddie gives him an extremely skeptical look. “And I’ll need you to put the tips for the vendors in different envelopes—make sure you label them and tell me *exactly* who I’m supposed to give them to.”

Ben grins. “You can have full run of my office.”

It was always going to be Eddie, Ben thinks. He had four excellent men to choose between and he’s not gonna say that any of them is without a doubt better than the rest—the *best* of the best men Ben knows—but Eddie was the one he first saw when he crashed into the water in the Barrens. They hung out in wheezy silence while Bill rode his bike to the pharmacy; and when Eddie explained *See you later, alligator* and that it’s traditionally followed by *After a while, crocodile*, Ben was delighted to find out that his new friends were so cool. He’d never thought to have friends before, let alone cool ones.

“Are you feeling better than the last time we went for a run?” Ben asks.

Eddie sighs. “Yeah.” He doesn’t go into detail, but he asks, “How about you?”

The advice that Eddie had given him last time was that Ben’s specialty is making a home for people. A safe space. A clubhouse. He thought of it the entire time he was directing the restoration—imagining not just Bev walking through the hallways, sleepy in the morning, but also Mike coming through the front door with his leather bag, and Bill finding his own books on the shelves, and Richie throwing himself down on the couch, and Eddie dragging suitcases up the stairs. And—if he’s honest with himself—Stan walking into the entryway and running his fingertips over the silk wallpaper, finding

the almost-hidden birds in the painted leaves and branches.

“Better,” Ben agrees. He was feeling lost and insignificant, compared to how magical—literally magical—his friends are. But Bev chose him. And he might not believe in himself, but he believes in her, and he’d do anything for her. Beverly’s safe harbor is the best thing he’s ever been.

Kay shows up in a rental car after dark.

“What’s Graustark?” she demands, hauling her suitcase up after her, because it’s on the sign outside the house. Technically the estate is part of a local historic landmark.

“Previous owners of the place,” Bev says as she moves forward to hug her. “Thank you for coming. How was your flight?”

“There was a baby in the seat next to me,” Kay replies. “Really well-behaved, though. Had a sippy cup during take-off, kept offering me Cheerios.”

Oh Jesus. Bev smiles. “Did you take the Cheerios?”

“I accepted the Cheerios and I pretend to eat them, I’m not a monster,” Kay says. “Where’s your cowboy?”

Ben leans in through the doorway and tips an imaginary hat to her. “Ma’am.”

“Ofbeverly,” Kay returns. Ben grins. “Thanks for putting me up.”

“Yeah, let me take you up to your room,” Bev says. “Richie and Eddie are here, Bill will be getting in really early tomorrow, and Mike’s coming in tomorrow afternoon.”

“Just the wedding party is staying here?” Kay asks.

“Just the party. Do you want help with your bag?”

Kay raises an eyebrow. “You think I fly with a bag I can’t lift over my

head? I'm never asking another bystander for help again. Is the Italian guy here?"

"The Italian guy is the best man," Ben confirms.

"Uh, I'm Polish?" Eddie says from the hallway.

"Oh!" Kay says, delighted. "Ben, move over." She sets her suitcase down and pushes past him to get a look at Eddie. Bev follows her and watches, amused, as Kay and Eddie realize they are the same height.

"Hello," Eddie says. "I'm Eddie Kaspbrak."

"Kay McCall." She holds out her hand and shakes Eddie's vigorously. "Irish." She lifts her head and looks down the hallway from where Richie is leaning in from the living room. "Well, if it isn't the comedian."

"America's worst, I've been told," Richie says casually. "So you beat me out for the title of maid of honor."

"Uh-huh," Kay says without further elaboration.

"Okay. Just remember, if anything happens, you have an understudy."

"Uh-huh," she says again, her voice dry as gunpowder.

Bev takes Kay up to her guestroom. It's separated from the master bedroom only by the bathroom; Bev's logic was that Kay would need to be nearer to her to help her get ready on Saturday. The Losers are basically on the other side of the house.

The second Bev closes the door behind them, Kay asks, "Did you buy the test?"

"Yes," Bev says.

"Did you take it?"

"No, it says to take it first thing in the morning."

“Okay. Do you need moral support while you pee on a stick?”

“It would be nice,” Bev says.

“Have you told Ben?”

“Not yet.” She shrugs. “I kind of don’t want to get his hopes up?”

Kay’s eyebrows raise and she sits back on her guest bed. She shakes her hair down from her ponytail—she’s wearing a sweater and jeans, and looks like she’s just washed her face. The scar has not detracted from her permanently youthful appearance; Kay modeled for her own collections back when she was just getting started, and her face is still very young.

“How about your hopes?”

Bev leans back against the door and looks to the side at the dresser. They totally went antiquing to furnish this house, finding random pieces and painting and varnishing on drop cloths in the middle of the room. This room just turned out blue, without any conscious decision on their part.

“My mother was a waitress,” Bev says. “She died when I was a teenager. She was... all right, I guess. Taught me to sew. She wished I’d dress a little more ladylike, but she didn’t want me going out on dates or anything either.” She reaches out and touches the edge of the runner on top of the dresser, the blue fringe. “I don’t think about her much when I sew, but that’s one thing she gave me, I guess.”

Kay is the kind of designer who doesn’t like to do much of her own sewing. Bev started out making costumes for college theater while she was putting together her collections for the end-of-semester fashion shows; Kay started designing but always resented the people who tried to make her learn to sew as a child. Her first book was on gendered perceptions of textile work, and she just got further and further away from cloth the more she kept writing. If this story about passing down needlework through the generations means anything to her, it doesn’t show on her face. She listens impassively, her pink face and hazel eyes calm as ever.

"My dad was like Tom," Bev confesses. "Or—Tom is like my dad. The only thing my mom ever said about it was, she asked me if he ever touched me. And I didn't know what she meant, I said no—the answer was no. But I was out pitching pennies with Ben and Eddie and some kid, I don't think we ever saw him again. But I beat him—" She glances up at Kay and gives her a half-smile, and Kay smiles back, encouraging. "—and he couldn't stand that. Being beaten by a girl. Losing his money. So he yelled, *Your mother's a whore* at me. And the first thing I thought of—" She lowers her gaze again and tilts her head to the side. "I didn't think about my mother. I mean, I started crying, but it wasn't because I was upset that he called my mother a whore. He said that, and the first thing I thought of was her asking, *Does he ever touch you? Has he ever touched you?*"

She glances back up at Kay, but Kay's face hasn't changed at all. She's lifted her chin slightly. There's sun behind her, limning her face in gold-white light and almost obscuring the scar on her face.

"So I didn't know what a whore was, only that it was really bad, and I didn't know what my mom meant when she asked that, but the pieces kind of—" She raises both hands and makes her fingertips kiss, miming the connection there. Like puzzle pieces slotting into place—giving her not the whole picture, but hinting at the shape of it. She lets her hands fall and then tucks them into the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt. "That's what I think about, when I think about having kids."

"Why?"

There's a faint challenge to Kay's tone, something interrogatory.

"I mean, they say you're not supposed to have kids with a man unless you can imagine having a son exactly like him," Bev says. "I'm glad Tom and I never had kids. I—" She grimaces. She'd like to be able to say that she'd love any child of her body no matter who the father was, but she thinks she'd be just as afraid of any lingering... impression Tom made on a son, just as much as she's afraid of the impression her father made on her.

Sometimes Beverly thinks that the worst thing would be to be like her father. To be violent, to try to own her children's bodies, to strike

them in the face and make them dread calling home. Sometimes she thinks that ache for violence—to dish it out as much as to receive it—is what she inherited from Alvin Marsh, as much as his red hair.

But sometimes she thinks the worst thing would be to be like her mother. To wait until Tom was at work or out of the house to corner her daughter and ask, *Has your father ever touched you?*

“I’m worried I’d be a shitty parent,” Bev says.

“Everyone’s worried they’d be a shitty parent,” Kay replies. “If you’re not worried, you’re actually more likely to be a shitty parent, because you’re not being considerate of that. Do you want kids?”

When Bev imagines having kids—she thinks she imagines Ben, actually. Not just out there playing with them on the grass, picking them up and swinging them, tossing a baby in the air. She imagines Ben at thirteen, round-faced and oblivious to the path he’s blocking, with headphones in his ears and a school project balanced on one hand like a tray at a restaurant. She imagines that kid coming home on his bike, talking about something he’s really excited about. Personality developing out of blankness. Ben’s hair and eyes and round face and red cheeks.

“I want his kids,” Bev says.

“Not what I asked,” Kay says. “Do you want your kids?”

Bev blinks once and then gives Kay a rueful smile. “You’re never gonna pull a punch, are you?”

“Never,” Kay agrees.

Bev imagines herself. Thirteen years old, having just gotten her first period, before she cut her hair. Standing in front of the display of feminine hygiene products, and some strange man *whistling* at her, as if she were more than a child. As if she were there for consumption, to comment on.

“I want to be better than my mom,” Bev says. Being better than her dad isn’t the hard part. “But I think having a kid just to—like, get back at my parents is a shitty reason to have a kid.”

“There are a thousand shitty reasons to have a kid,” Kay says. “The best reason to have a kid is because you want to raise a child.” She shrugs. “That’s why I don’t have kids.”

“Ruling you out for godmother.”

“Ask Lesley, not me.”

“Oh, please,” Bev says, because Kay took a shard of glass to the face rather than risk Bev’s safety. She drums her fingers on the top of the dresser. “We have this big huge house because we’re gonna have kids.”

“Fuck the house,” Kay says. “Fuck what anyone else says. Yes or no, Bev.”

“I don’t know,” Bev says. “Maybe.” If the answer is yes, if she’s pregnant right now or if she gets pregnant tomorrow or if she finally goes back to the clinic and does the IVF—if it’s yes, this is the only way she’d want to have them. With Ben. In this house. Their life.

“Okay,” says Kay, surprisingly easy. Bev’s surprised she lets her go without a fight.

“You’re saying that because I gotta take a pregnancy test, aren’t you?”

“Hey, I’ll do whatever you want,” Kay says. “If you want to never tell your cowboy and go end the pregnancy somewhere, I’ll hold your hand and I’ll take the secret to my grave.”

Bev shakes her head. It’s not that having an abortion is out of the question, but she’s convinced that Ben wouldn’t hold it against her if she decided she couldn’t do a pregnancy. It would feel like a bit of a waste, after all the plans.

It turns out not to matter anyway. In the morning, when Ben gets up for his usual run, Bev rolls over and feels the blood come burbling out of her. She races to the toilet quickly and cleans up.

When Ben comes back, he finds her sitting in the empty bathtub. He startles to find her there, half-hidden behind the shower curtain, but

he gets himself together quickly, just leaning on the door.

“Are you okay?” he asks. She is sitting, wearing only her pajama top, bleeding casually into the tub.

“I’m not pregnant,” she tells him. “I thought I might be. I was late.”

Ben nods, sympathetic, and then stops. His brow furrows. “Did you take Richie with you to buy a pregnancy test?”

“Yep,” Bev says. “By the way, apparently we have to name our firstborn either Richard or Richardine now.”

“Beverly, I know he’s your best friend, but I will literally die before I name my daughter Richardine,” Ben says. “Richardine Hanscom. Poor girl doesn’t have a chance.”

Bev leans back and rests her head on the shower tile, smiling at him. “You’re my best friend.”

He smiles. “Oh, you’re my best friend too.”

“You think I’d be a good mom?”

It’s probably a question she should have asked before now. But she’s been dwelling on it for a little bit.

Ben—triangles of sweat staining his chest and back, and probably wanting to take his shower now—blinks once and then sits down on the closed toilet lid. “Yeah.”

“I don’t know what a good mom does.”

He leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees. “Did I tell you about my watch?” he asks.

She remembers his watch. He was the only kid who walked around with a man’s watch—Eddie had his little pager with its regular alarms telling him when to take his medicine, but Ben’s watch cost money and you could tell. It was real metal.

“Tell me again,” she says, because the memory is fuzzy.

“All the kids were going missing,” Ben says. “And they had implemented the curfew. And my mom had to work during the day, and I was kind of left to my own devices. So she said that I had to be home for dinner, every day. She told me what time it was, every day. And she said that if I was ever late, she would go straight to the police. She wasn’t—she didn’t say this, I was thirteen—but she was not fucking around.”

Bev puts her palms on her bare knees. “My mom never did that,” she says. She remembers calling home from Bill’s house once, lying and saying that she was at the community center and that she’d be carpooling home with some of the other kids. Her mom asked to make sure she wasn’t going on dates with boys, and then she asked if any of Bev’s *other girl friends* were there—but Bev didn’t have girl friends. The girls at school poured garbage on her.

“I don’t think anyone else’s mom did that,” Ben says. Eddie’s mom was very concerned about his safety, but in the same clutching way that Bev’s dad *worried*. Arlene Hanscom gave her son just enough slack to prove himself worthy of it. The presence of It in town polluted everyone—the adults and the children alike, making their own evils more concentrated, digging roots in deep. But Ben’s mom didn’t have that.

“You think I’d call the police?” Bev asks, because Ben loves his mother and thinks of her as a good mom. He’s talked a little bit about how stressed she got when he was trying to lose weight, how she needed to feel like she was taking care of him. If that’s his model for a good mom, Bev doesn’t know how she’s supposed to live up to that. It’s almost as hard to live up to a dead woman as it is to live up to your first love.

“No,” Ben says. “I think you’d call the police, and then you’d go find your kid yourself. You’re like that, you know. You take things into your own hands.”

She can’t help but smile at that, in spite of the memories it conjures. Tom on the courthouse steps, Bev turning around and spitting the words that would kill him dead. A bad memory—but definitely taking things into her own hands.

There's good and evil in Bev, she's sure. But taking things into her own hands is the opposite of complacency. Of watching silently by and worrying about whether your husband has ever laid hands on your daughter.

"With my slingshot?" Bev asks.

Ben smiles too. "With your slingshot."

Bill gets in early and Bev, Ben, and Eddie are all up to greet him. Kay introduces herself and goes back to her emails on her phone—she doesn't know Bev's boys as well as she knows Bev, and while she's perfectly polite, she's also a workaholic. Bill has the wide-eyed look of someone who fell asleep on an airplane and was woken up before he was ready.

"Are you jet-lagged?" Bev asks as she hugs him.

"Extremely," Bill says. "Eddie tells me—" Eddie shoots Bill a warning look and Bill visibly changes what he was about to say. "—that you're all early risers, though. Hello." He bends down and greets Fred, who licks his fingers and then nudges the backs of his calves, trying to herd him toward the kitchen.

"Fred, leave it," Bev says. "If you need to take a nap—"

Bill's eyes widen even further and he nods fervently.

Bev still feels kind of peripherally responsible for keeping Kay entertained, but Kay just waves a hand. "I'm good. Meet you in the office to look at your reception dress?"

"Thank you thank you," Bev tells her, because in this arena Kay's opinion is more valuable than Richie's.

Leading Bill up to the guest room is almost awkward, because of the glaring absence—not of Ben, who would happily have come up to show Bill his guest room with his built-in bookshelves and the assortment of William Denbrough novels—but of Audra.

"How is she?" Bev asks in the hallway.

She doesn't have to explain who she means; Bill immediately smiles, which is a little surprising but very reassuring. "She's doing pretty well, actually. Feeling good. We've been going to marriage counseling, and—it turns out I might have some deep-seated issues."

Bev smiles back. "No. You?"

"Yeah. But we're working through it. And she's excited—she's almost fifty by now, we never thought this would happen for us. I mean—I'm excited too. I'm nervous, but."

Bev halts just outside the guest room. "Wait."

Bill raises his eyebrows. "What?"

"Are you—" Honestly, she'd thought that Audra declined to come because she resented Bev for kissing her husband. Which Bev can't blame her for, actually—when Bill said he would be arriving by himself, it felt too awkward for her to probe into reasons. "Are you having a baby?"

Bill's expression shifts from cheerful to utterly horrified. "Did I not tell you?"

There's a thud from down the hall, and then Richie yells, "*What?*"

"Hi, Richie," Bill says dryly.

Richie yanks the door to his neighboring guest room open and emerges in his boxers and a T-shirt. It is more of Richie than Bev ever wanted to see. He's not even wearing his glasses, and his hair looks insane. He points at Bill.

"Are *you* having a kid?"

Bill grins. "I'm having a kid."

"Holy shit, Big Bill, you're having a fucking kid, you're gonna be a fucking dad." He points at Bev. "Are *you* having a kid?"

She shakes her head.

“Well, neither is Eddie, and unless Mike is about to show up with an actual baby, that means you’re still winning, Denbrough.” He points both index fingers at Bill. “So I say *name it after me!* Richard Denbrough! Richardine! Richenza! That one’s the name of an empress!”

And then he closes the door and vanishes.

Bill blinks twice and then turns to Bev. In a lower voice, he asks, “Did that just happen?”

“Unfortunately,” Bev replies in an undertone.

“Yeah, Audra’s pregnant. She’s at almost thirty weeks, she missed the cutoff for flying, you know, or she’d be here. She’s met Mike, she’d like to meet the rest of the gang. She’s—” Bill pushes his thinning hair back from his forehead, the silver streak in the front laying flat. He shakes his head again. “I really thought I’d told you, I didn’t just—I freaked out a little bit, when we found out. Are—” He swallows. “Sorry.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t be.”

“Yeah.” He gestures to the door. “Is this it?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he repeats, and opens the door to his room. It’s decorated in much the same way that Richie and Eddie’s suite is—it’s meant to be a place for Audra just as much as Bill. There are no posters, but there are the bookshelves with Ben’s new collection of first-edition William Denbroughs, and the faint western influence that Ben smirked over and murmured *Hi-yo, Silver, away!* as they decorated. “Oh wow.”

“That’s really great, Bill,” Bev says, and she means it. Maybe a child doesn’t repair a marriage. But it’s definitely something to run towards.

The kitchen is long, almost a galley, and it’s bisected almost in half

by the island that protrudes out from the right side of the wall. Eddie is on the other half of the kitchen fussing with the coffeemaker, visible only as a head that appears over the shoulders of Mike, Richie, and Bill, who are all lined up on the barstools. Mike and Bill are facing Ben as though he's walked into an intervention. Richie looks only half awake.

Ben freezes. Under his arm, Fred creeps in to examine all the intruders in the room where he eats.

"Happy bachelor party," Mike says.

"This was the worst idea but it's too late," Richie says, and throws something at Ben's head.

Ben catches it. It's a piece of fabric, bright red. He gives Richie a weird look and then unfolds it.

It's a pair of shorts. Very short shorts. Identical to the ones Eddie is wearing, actually.

"This is my official wedding gift, by the way," Richie says.

"Okay, the run was my idea. The shorts were all him, I can take no responsibility for it," Eddie says.

"You were the inspiration!"

"Turn them around," Mike says quietly, because Ben is still holding up the shorts.

Ben blinks and turns the shorts around to look at the seat.

Written across the butt in white block letters is *HAYSTACK*.

"Jesus Christ, Richie," Ben says, but he's already laughing.

"Oh no, it gets worse," Bill says, and then gets up with a sigh and comes around the island. He, too, is wearing tiny red shorts. And, with the air of one already resigned to his own death, he turns around and shows Ben his ass.

His shorts say *BIG BILL*.

“Richie,” Ben says.

Mike gets up, casually bumps his hip against Bill’s, and turns to display his shorts as well. Perhaps less inspired, his shorts say *MIKEY*. Also they’re borderline indecent on Mike, who at six-foot-four-inches might as well be wearing briefs. He looks like he’s either a male stripper or modeling for something. He points to his ass with both thumbs.

Ben closes his eyes. “Tell me what I think is about to happen isn’t about to happen.”

“You would be wrong,” Richie says, and gets up to stand on Mike’s other side.

Ben says, “*Jesus Christ, Richie!*” and jerks his eyes up to the ceiling, because he can basically see Richie’s entire dick.

Eddie has gone bright red on the other side of the kitchen.

Richie, apparently unfazed, turns around to display that his shorts say *TRASHMOUTH* on the butt.

“Okay,” Ben says. “This is fun and all, but unless all of you want to see my junk, I’m gonna go put on a jockstrap—and Richie, I will *pay you to wear one, Jesus fucking Christ.*”

“*I packed you one, you jackass,*” Eddie snarls, but he’s also staring at Richie’s pelvis.

“Don’t be jealous, baby,” Richie says.

It’s not even seven in the morning, but Ben is contemplating having a drink. “Okay,” he says. “When I come back, *I don’t want to be able to see anyone’s penis, got it?*”

“Totally not in the spirit of the bachelor party,” Richie says.

“I’m pretty sure that traditional bachelor parties have minimal penis exposure,” Bill says.

“Straight bachelor parties, maybe.”

Ben goes back up the stairs to his room. Bev sits up when he opens the door and closes it carefully behind him.

“Where’s Fred?” she asks.

“Begging Eddie to acknowledge him,” Ben says. “Apparently there’s a uniform for my bachelor party.” He pulls off his shorts and underwear and puts on a jockstrap, then slides the shorts up his legs. They sit on his hips. He looks up at Bev. “Did you tell Richie my waistband size?”

“No,” Bev says, “but I’m pretty sure he’s checked you out enough to eyeball it.”

Ben cringes. “I just saw, like, his whole penis.”

Bev starts laughing.

“No, no, it gets worse.” He turns around to show her the nickname written across his butt.

When he goes back downstairs, Beverly comes with him, shuffling along in her pajamas and her hoodie, camera in tow. Richie has put on boxers underneath his short-shorts, and the green plaid hems of the legs stick out under the material. Of the whole group, only Mike actually looks good in them.

From the window, Bev gets a great shot of the five of them running in a line—first Fred, heading the pack, then Ben, then Eddie, then Mike, then Bill, and Richie in the back. You can’t tell in the photos, but they’re all singing “Doo Wah Diddy Diddy” like Tom Hanks in *Stripes*. With the green grass under them and the early morning sky behind them, they look like nothing so much as a series of silhouettes on white.

Ben puts the picture on a canvas and hangs it up over his computer. No one will be able to see it at the camera angle, but he’ll be able to look up at it whenever he wants, and smile.

Kay agrees that the reception dress is the way to go.

“You totally made yourself a second dress,” she says, as she’s adjusting Bev’s neckline. It cuts all the way down between her breasts in a deep V, but the cape lays over the arms and back and hides more skin. “Did you like this one better when you were making it?”

“I mean, the reception dress is the fun dress, right?” Bev asks. “I’m supposed to dance in it and everything.”

Kay just shakes her head. “I can’t believe you made yourself a professional wedding dress and then a fun wedding dress. Look at this—you’re so shiny, I love it.” She strokes a hand over Bev’s shoulderblade, feeling the satin. “Can you dance in this?”

“I mean, I’m not going to be doing the Lindy Hop or anything,” Bev says. If she’d wanted to she could have slit the skirt, but it felt like too much with the neckline. She adjusts the hem of her skirt and straightens her shoulders. “How do I look?”

Kay smiles. “Perfect.”

Bev raises her eyebrows. “Better than the first time?”

“Oh, marriage is like pancakes, everyone knows the first one’s a throwaway,” Kay says.

Bev laughs despite herself. “I don’t think that’s a thing.”

“Trust me, I’m an expert.”

“You are not.”

“I married Sam Chacowicz, I’m an expert.” She kisses the air next to Bev’s cheek so as not to transfer lipstick onto Bev’s makeup, and then takes a step back. She’s wearing red. She laughed when Bev said they were just doing red and white for the colors. “Also the best man is melting down over boutonnieres, so I’m just gonna wait here in the house with you until all the men are gone, okay?”

“That’s fine,” Bev says.

"I'll tell you when the coast is clear," she says, and walks out onto the landing to be sure Ben is gone before Bev comes out of the bedroom.

In the meantime, Bev has a few minutes just to herself, without being scrutinized. Downstairs she can hear Eddie's voice raised frantically, and Richie laughing even louder.

She gets up and walks into the bathroom and leans over the sink to look in the mirror. She tilts her head at different angles.

She spots Stanley standing in the bedroom, visible through the doorway. He's a grown man, wearing his reading glasses and his cardigan. His curls are dark and fall over his forehead, and he's smiling.

The wave of relief that goes through Bev almost knocks her elbows out from under her.

"God, I wanted you to be here so bad," she tells him.

Stanley smiles, knowing.

She closes her eyes. "I'm gonna turn around," she says. "And I'm gonna see you, okay?"

But he can't answer.

She turns and gazes back into her room.

And he's there.

She walks over to him immediately, almost stumbling in her heels with her eagerness. When she reaches for his shoulders her hands go right through him, and he looks down at her in something like alarm. She withdraws her hands.

"Sorry," she says.

Stan shakes his head and lifts both hands toward her left wrist, like he'd like to touch her but he can't. Bev obligingly raises her hand for him, and he reaches out and holds his index finger and thumb on either side of her engagement ring, like he's examining it.

She doesn't know what made Ben decide on the daisies. The white gold, the ruby accents, she smiled when she saw them because she knew he was thinking about January embers again—he's putting January embers into everything he makes for her. But the daisies on the band almost surprised her—mostly because, in a way, she'd kind of been expecting them.

Stan smiles.

"We love you," she tells him. She wants to tell him, *I wish I'd been at your wedding*, but she's afraid to remind him and frighten him away.

I know, Stan mouths.

She leans up to kiss his cheek. She feels nothing there, but she can pretend. Stan lowers his head for her and everything, and when she drops back down he's wearing an *aw shucks* kind of smile on his face.

"Bev!" Kay calls. "Men are gone! Get ready!"

"Okay," Bev calls back down, still looking at Stan. She's afraid that if she looks away from him she'll lose him.

It's okay, he mouths at her. *Let's go*.

She wants to hug him. It's not fair that she can't—not fair that she can't wrap him up in her arms and have him here and comfort him and share this with him as much as she's sharing it with any of the rest of her boys. She never got the time with him that she wanted. She wants it more now. There's a photo of him on a table at the reception, along with Ben's mom, *In Memory of Those Gone*, but she wants him standing up in a suit beside Ben, wants Eddie fussing with his boutonniere, wants him in the photo of the bachelor party run.

"I love you," she tells him.

I love you too. Stan smiles. *Let's go*.

When Bev walks down the aisle—something she didn't do at her courthouse wedding the last time—she's flanked on one side by her dog, who loves her more than himself. And on her left side, one hand shoved deep in the pocket of his cardigan and the other resting

almost through her arm, Stan the Man escorts her.

Ben turns to look at her and the look on his face is no help. He looks like he's seen a miracle. But Mike immediately bursts into tears, and that's how she knows the Losers can see him. That and the officiant's and Kay's general beatific smiles at seeing the bride, without any confusion over who the man in the glasses and the cardigan is.

She walks up to the archway Ben carefully put up on the front lawn and takes a slight step up to the platform.

The officiant asks, "Who gives this woman to be married?"

Bev turns to look over her left shoulder at Stan, who smiles and winks and takes a step to the side, and then he's gone. Bev thinks she might cry. For the rest of the guests, she looks down at Fred.

"Can I get married now?" she asks the dog.

There's a ripple of laughter behind her.

"Yeah?" she asks Fred. Fred looks up at her with black eyes, panting. He's a little nervous about all of the people, especially the strange men, visiting his home. "Why don't you sit? Go sit."

Fred whines a little but his butt hits the grass.

There's more laughter and some general cooing from the guests.

"That's a good boy," she says. "Lay down. All the way down."

Fred grumbles but settles the front half of his body down on the grass too, and pants.

"Good boy," Bev tells him. "You stay."

Richie whispers, "Do you talk to Ben like that?"

The officiant looks unamused, but Ben whispers back, "When I'm good," and Richie has to pretend to be overcome with tears to hide his silent laughing fit.

Mr. and Mrs. Hanscom are married.

There's a kiss.

(But this is not news to you, so we'll move on.)

Ben and Bev had a lot of debate over what their first dance would be as a married couple. Not because they had any unyielding demands, but because they have a sense of ceremony, and this ritual feels like it sets a tone. Bev had some clear parameters, and Ben acquiesced with some chagrin. But it ended in a compromise.

They walk out of the house and into the backyard with “80s Baby” by New Kids on the Block playing over the speakers.

Richie whoops so loudly he startles Fred and Fred immediately runs up to Bev, turns his back to her, and growls at Richie. Richie puts both hands up as though the dog has pulled a gun on him. Ben looks at Bev and then puts her hand in his, and they dance on the spot in the center of the ring of tables that has been designated as the dance floor.

“You saw Stanley, right?” Bev asks. “He’s here.”

“I... noticed him,” Ben admits, because he saw very little that wasn’t Bev as soon as she pushed through the screen door. “I mean, it makes sense he’d want to be here for you.”

“And you,” Bev reminds him.

Ben shakes his head. “Everyone’s here for you.”

Bev turns them so that they can see Ricky Lee and his family waving at them from their table. The three recipients of Ben’s father’s old silver dollars are, from youngest to oldest, standing on their chair, brandishing an empty champagne glass, and clearly pretending not to be related to their family. Ricky Lee is crying a little. Ben smiles at him and lets Bev continue to steer them in their little rotations.

“Okay, so there’s a little of me,” he admits.

"There's just enough of you," Bev says. "I could go for more of you."

Ben blinks, because if they wanted to quickly have sex on their wedding day, they kind of missed their window as soon as they came out to the reception. "I—uh."

She slides her hands up over the back of his neck and leans on him. She feels so cool in her white satin.

"You are the most beautiful woman in the world," he tells her. "But you knew that."

"I think you might be a little biased."

"Nah," Ben says. He kisses the crown of her head; she smells like hairspray and powder. He thinks she wears her perfume in her hair, too; he doesn't know much about perfume, but as far as he's concerned, the scent is just *Beverly*. "But you're also the bravest woman in the world—" He kisses her head again. "—and the smartest woman in the world—" Kiss. "—and the most magical woman in the world. And I love you, but if you want to have a quickie during our wedding, you better come up with a distraction so we can sneak away."

Bev bursts out laughing so hard that it's a good thing he can just about hold her up. Over her head, Ben can see people smiling at them.

"I meant, I wanna have kids," Bev says. "Like, soon. I'm not competing with the Denbroughs or anything, but I was... weirdly bummed not to be pregnant this time."

Part of Ben feels like the laws of physics are no longer applicable to him. Like he could step right up into midair and hover, and offer Bev a hand up, and then they'd fly.

"And if Bill has his kid first," Ben murmurs.

She raises her face and looks him in the eye as they both whisper, "*Richardine*," and then dissolve into laughter.

After dancing Ben goes around greeting guests. He stops and blows a

kiss to the table with the photo of his mother and of Stan, and then he carries on. On the dance floor he can see Bev dancing with Richie, and Eddie dancing with Kay. Eddie seems to be trying to convince Kay that Richie's former stage persona was just that, a persona, and seems to be trying to do this by enumerating Richie's positive qualities. Ben almost rolls his eyes—if they don't get married next, he doesn't know what he'll do. Lock them in a room with a justice of the peace, or something.

He leans down between Mike and Bill where they're talking at their table. "I have gifts for you," he says. "They're back at the house." All his groomsmen—and Kay—have watches waiting for them in nice gift bags with red tissue paper.

"You didn't have to do that," Mike says.

"Yeah, I did," Ben says. "Are either of you dancing?"

Mike makes a noncommittal noise. "I don't know. This playlist seems a little white."

"We've got 'Walk This Way' coming up."

"Better," Mike allows. "Keep working on it."

"Eddie left me in charge of making sure nobody steals anything off your gift table while he's dancing," Bill says, his voice very dry. "In fact, I'm about to go patrol." He picks up his glass, raises his eyebrows at Ben in something like a salute, and pats him on the shoulder as he goes.

Ben asks Mike, "Did you bring your Kindle to my wedding?"

"It's back at the house," Mike allows. "Why?"

Ben blinks once, wondering whether or not he actually wants to ask the question, before he just goes with it. "In every world—is it her and me?"

Mike's face doesn't change, but he smiles slightly. "What do you think?"

And that's such a cop-out, but also it's the only answer Mike could give. In an infinite number of worlds, infinite numbers of Beverly Marshes and Ben Hanscoms, in how many of them is he lucky enough to walk away with the woman he loves and friends by his side? In how many of them is Stan here in person for their wedding? In how many of them does Ben meet Patty Uris and Audra Phillips? In how many of them do their kids meet up once every summer and go chase each other through the woods behind this house? Do they camp out on the lawn together? Does Ben build tree houses and forts and campfires? In how many of them is his mother alive to dance with him at his wedding? In how many of them is his father there, his hand in his mother's in their chairs in front of the altar?

The tinkling chimes that open "I'll Be Loving You (Forever)" start up.

Ben turns to look at his wife, who is smirking at him, resplendent in white satin with her hair burning like fire. Her eyes are bright and her lips are red.

It doesn't matter. In every world, every single one, he loves her.

Notes for the Chapter:

And that's the end! I need to think long and hard about how I'm going to do Bill's finale to this series-- I'm pretty excited to write some of the scenes, but Bill just isn't being obliging by giving me an "L" verb to use for the title--"Things that Happen After Bill"-- what? What does Bill do?

Also someday I'll get around to writing the bonus obligatory-Richie-Tozier's-coming-out-standup-routine fic, but since I haven't made much progress writing that on my phone, please allow me to recommend [The 'Do Not Fucking Touch Me' Tour by MellytheHun](#). Thanks to qianwanshi for moral support, and to the TwiTter crowd for endless good fic recommendations and pushing my stuff harder than I deserve. You can find me @IfItHollers.

[Bev's engagement ring](#)

As always, you can find me in the comments.